

Division Leclerc

The Leclerc Column and Free French
2nd Armored Division, 1940–1946



**M. P. ROBINSON &
THOMAS SEIGNON**

ILLUSTRATED BY RAFFAELE RUGGERI

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Series editor Martin Windrow

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
<i>Nom de guerre: from Captain de Hautcloque to Major Leclerc</i>	
CHRONOLOGY	6
1940–43: LA COLONNE LECLERC	9
February 1941: Koufra ■ February–March 1942: the Fezzan ■ December 1942–January 1943: Fort Lamy to Tripoli ■ Factional rivalries following Operation “Torch” ■ L Force: Tunisia, March–May 1943	
1943: 2ème DIVISION BLINDÉE	17
Building a new army and a new division ■ Preparations in the UK	
UNIT COMPOSITION	23
Armor * Reconnaissance ■ Tank destroyer ■ Infantry ■ Artillery ■ Engineers	
1944: FRANCE	28
August: Normandy ■ Liberation of Paris: the approach – penetration and assault September: Lorraine – Dompierre ■ October: Baccarat ■ November: the Vosges – Strasbourg ■ December: shock from the Ardennes	
1945: THE LAST BATTLES	51
January–March: the Colmar Pocket ■ April: Royan ■ April–May: into Bavaria	
AFTERMATH & CONCLUSION	57
Farewells ■ Indochina ■ Assessment	
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	63
INDEX	64

DIVISION LECLERC

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INTRODUCTION

Captain Philippe de Hauteclocque (center), seen among fellow staff officers of the 4ème Division d'Infanterie during the "Phoney War" of winter 1939–1940. De Hauteclocque managed to escape the encirclement of the division around Lille during the night of June 4/5, 1940, but was wounded on June 14 while fighting with the 3ème Division Légère Mécanisée in the Aube region. When German troops entered his hospital, he escaped through a window and stole a bicycle. After warning his family of his intentions, he made his way first to Spain and then to Portugal, using false ID in the name of "François Leclerc." Via the port of Lisbon, he managed to join De Gaulle's Free French Forces in London on July 25, 1940.

The Allied defeat in the Battle of France in May–June 1940 culminated with the German entry into undefended Paris on June 14. On June 17 a radio broadcast announced that a new regime headed by the 84-year-old Marshal Philippe Pétain had replaced the government of Premier Paul Reynaud, and would seek an armistice with Germany. The following day, far fewer Frenchmen heard a BBC broadcast from London by the French junior defense minister, BrigGen Charles de Gaulle, rejecting any armistice and calling on Frenchmen everywhere to continue the fight alongside Great Britain.

The Armistice announced on June 22, and endorsed overwhelmingly by a vote of parliamentary suicide on July 10, ceded the whole of northern and western France to German occupation, while the authoritarian Pétain regime, based in the city of Vichy, would govern a new "French State" in unoccupied central and southern France. It would retain a 100,000-man "Armistice Army," plus more than twice that many colonial garrison troops in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, the Levant, France's colonies in West and Equatorial Africa, and in the Far East.

Reeling from the national disaster, and lacking any political alternative, a large proportion of the French public took hope from the paternalistic appeal of the admired Great War hero Pétain. The Army's officer corps, also shocked

and disoriented by defeat and the collapse of the Third Republic, faced painful choices. While the Occupation was bitter, it could be argued that legally they owed obedience to Pétain's *de facto* government; their priority was to preserve what was left of the Army and the national territory, and to guard the French Empire which the Armistice had left them. In 1940 very few proved willing to risk everything by joining De Gaulle's handful of refugees in beleaguered Britain, which itself faced the threat of German invasion. Nevertheless, from the moment De Gaulle made his intentions clear on June 18, a small group of soldiers, sailors and airmen resolved to follow him. Completely reliant on British resources and goodwill (both of



which were more theoretical than practical at this moment of crisis), De Gaulle formed a government-in-exile, complete with tiny embryo armed forces designated the *Forces Françaises Libres* (Free French Forces – FFL), which took as their emblem the Cross of Lorraine.

Captain Philippe de Hauteclocque was among the first officers to join the FFL in Britain, despite his background in the solidly conservative, nostalgically monarchist, devoutly Catholic caste most likely to find Pétain's appeal attractive. The son of a papal count, from a line of *chevaliers* that had served France since the Middle Ages, De Hauteclocque was born at Belloy-St-Leonard in Picardy on November 22, 1902. He had witnessed the Great War as a teenager, had lost two uncles in 1914, and had always expected to serve his country as a cavalry officer. He entered St-Cyr in 1922 and graduated from the Saumur cavalry school in 1925. De Hauteclocque served first in the 5^{ème} Régiment de Cuirassiers in the French-occupied Sarre region of the Rhineland, before transferring to the 8^{ème} Spahis in Morocco, where he saw active service leading irregular *goumiers* in the aftermath of the Rif War. He was decorated for valor in close combat in the Atlas Mountains during a second Moroccan tour in the 1930s. By 1940 the 38-year-old Capt de Hauteclocque was a trained staff officer, whose valuable experience of colonial warfare at the end of long supply lines had taught him to plan thoroughly, but always to be ready to improvise.

Nom de guerre: from Captain de Hautclocque to Major Leclerc

For his escape to England, De Hauteclocque chose the inconspicuous name “Leclerc.” Taking on a false identity was a widespread practice among these “Gaullists of the first hour,” whose decision exposed their families to reprisals (having married young, De Hauteclocque left behind a wife and no fewer than six children.) He could only hope that he would be counted by the authorities among the missing or presumed dead.

The Franco-British relationship underwent great strains in the wake of France's defeat, especially after the Royal Navy's attack on the Vichy French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir in July 1940 and the seizure of French warships in Allied ports. The number of French soldiers available to De Gaulle was at first negligible. Most of the 122,000 evacuated from Dunkirk had returned to France before the Armistice and were now in German captivity. Perhaps 2,000, more than half of them Foreign Legion returned from the Norwegian campaign, were still in Britain, but apart from individual officers few recruits for the FFL were forthcoming from Metropolitan France. De Gaulle therefore turned his eyes towards the substantial French forces in Africa; could they be persuaded to fight on?

Leclerc's personal qualities and colonial experience had clearly impressed the general, who immediately promoted him to major, and gave him a mission appropriate to a much higher rank. With a couple of dozen others, he was ordered to make his way to Africa and rally France's Equatorial African colonies to the banner of the FFL. Within ten days Leclerc was aboard an RAF Short Clyde flying boat on his way to Nigeria.



By spring 1945, having officially changed his name to “Leclerc de Hautclocque,” the commander of the 2^{ème} Division Blindée was the second most famous man in France, after Charles de Gaulle. At the age of only 43, in just over four years he had been promoted from captain to four-star general. As a passionately determined patriot, his absolute loyalty to Gen de Gaulle and his impatience with “politics” had led to quarrels both with ex-Vichy generals resentful of his meteoric promotion and unique esteem, and with senior US officers angered by episodes of disobedience. However, he enjoyed the respect of both Montgomery and Patton – not something that many men could claim. While he was a dashing and hard-driving commander, and subject to occasional bursts of fury (as when confronted by French prisoners from a Waffen-SS unit), he was a devout man who lived with great personal simplicity, and he earned warm loyalty among his officers and men.

CHRONOLOGY

La Colonne Leclerc, 1940–43:

1940:

- July 26 Capt Philippe de Hauteclocque (“Leclerc”) arrives in London to join Gen de Gaulle’s *Forces Françaises Libres* (FFL).
- August 6 Maj Leclerc leaves UK for French Equatorial Africa via Nigeria.
- August 26 Colony of Cameroun rejects Vichy authority and declares for the FFL.
- August 27-28 Colonies of Tchad and French Congo declare for the FFL.
- August 27 Capt Louis Dio leads his company of the Régiment de Tirailleurs Sénégalais du Tchad (RTST) to join Leclerc.
- October 8 Gen de Gaulle visits Leclerc in Douala, Cameroun, and authorizes advance into Gabon.
- November 12 Leclerc’s force captures Libreville, capital of Gabon.
- November 25 Leclerc confirmed in his assumed rank of colonel.
- December 3 Col Leclerc appointed to command Régiment de Tirailleurs Sénégalais du Tchad.

1941:

- January 11 Successful raid by British Army’s Long Range Desert Group and FFL element on Italian-held Mourzouk.
- February 16 *Colonne Leclerc* attacks Kouffra Oasis, capturing El Tag fort on March 1.
- April 10 Leclerc promoted *général de brigade* (two-star).

1942:

- February-March Leclerc conducts his first raiding campaign into the Fezzan (Italian southern Libya).
- December 16 Leclerc launches second Fezzan campaign, marching from Fort Lamy with objective of reaching Tripoli on Mediterranean coast.

1943:

- January 13 Leclerc’s force reaches Mourzouk; first contact with British patrol at Hon.
- January 26 Leclerc reaches Tripoli and links up with British Eighth Army, placing his troops at Gen Montgomery’s disposal.
- February 20 Leclerc begins advance into Tunisia with his enlarged “L Force.”
- March 6 L Force first engages German troops.
- March 10 L Force wins victory at Ksar Rhilane. *Colonne Volante* placed under command of L Force.
- March 22 L Force engaged at Djebel Hatleb.
- March 29 Capture of Gabès.
- April 6 Battle of Oued (Wadi) Akarit.
- April 12 Battle of Kairouan.
- May 7 British capture of Tunis.

2ème Division Blindée. 1943–45:

- May 25 Leclerc promoted *général de division* (three-star).



England, late July 1944: the halftrack named *Brest* identifies this column as the 2ème Section (platoon), 1ère Compagnie, 1 Bataillon/ Régiment de Marche du Tchad. The white star for Allied ground-air recognition was omnipresent on the division's vehicles. The 2ème DB's specific French markings were never fully standardized, and variations existed between units. The French flag, clearly seen here on the side door and front fender, was not marked on all this regiment's halftracks. Note the pre-embarkation US Transportation Quartermaster bars above the divisional sign on the mudguard.

May 30	L Force becomes 2ème Division des FFL, and moves to Sabratha, Libya.
August 24	2ème Division des FFL moves to Temara in Morocco, and becomes 2ème Division Blindée (2 DB).
1944:	
April 11	First elements of 2 DB embark for United Kingdom at Mers El Kebir, Algeria.
April 22	First units of division arrive in UK; 2 DB is assigned to US XV Corps (Gen Haislip), Third Army.
August 1	2 DB begins landings over Utah Beach, Normandy, simultaneously with Operation "Cobra" south of Cotentin Peninsula.
August 10–12	2 DB liberates Alençon.
August 13–14	2 DB advances to Argentan.
August 19	2 DB transferred to US V Corps (Gen Gerow), First Army.
August 21	<i>Groupment Tactique</i> Langlade helps close the Falaise Pocket. Without Gerow's permission, Leclerc orders LtCol de Guillebon to reconnoiter German positions on approaches to Versailles.
August 22	Leclerc obtains American agreement for drive on Paris.
August 23	2 DB advances to Rambouillet staging area.
August 24–25	2 DB penetrates, then liberates central Paris.
August 26	2 DB parades through Paris with Gen de Gaulle, while fighting continues in northern suburbs.
August 27	Capture of Le Bourget ends the fighting in immediate surroundings of Paris. Thereafter division is rested while awaiting resupply; returns to US XV Corps, Third Army.
September 8	Leclerc orders GTs Langlade and Rémy to advance eastward into Lorraine.
September 11	GT Rémy contacts elements of 1 DMI of Gen de Lattre's French First Army at Montbard.

The preserved pennant of 9ème Compagnie, III/ RMT. Created mainly from a mixed Colonial force originally designated the Africa Free Corps, and led by veterans of the Leclerc Column, the RMT was organized on the model of a US mechanized infantry regiment in 1943 during the 2ème DB's training. A distinct feature of the 9ème Cie was that it was mainly composed of former Spanish Republican soldiers, who had joined the Foreign Legion from French internment camps to continue the fight against fascism; see further details under Plate C. The motif at upper left is the "mosquito" badge of the Free French Forces, and the Cross of Lorraine has been incorporated with the anchor of the Colonial Troops.



- September 12–13 GT Langlade almost wipes out 112. Panzer-Brigade at Dompaire.
- September 21 GTs Dio and Rémy cross Moselle and advance to Mortagne river.
- October 1 GT V (Guillebon) repulses German counterattack in Anglemont area. Due to supply shortages, division spends rest of month in static positions, while Leclerc prepares for attack on Baccarat.
- October 31 Liberation of Baccarat.
- November 10 Corps commander Gen Haislip orders Leclerc to support US 44th and 79th Inf Divs advancing towards Saverne in the Vosges hills of Alsace.
- November 12 Leclerc briefs staff and unit commanders on his personal plan to cross the Vosges and capture Strasbourg at the first opportunity.
- November 13 2 DB follows US 44th and 79th Inf Divs up Route Nationale 4 towards Saverne.
- November 16–18 Frustrated by slow advance, Leclerc sends units east to capture Vezouze river crossings and Badonviller.
- November 19–20 Leclerc sends 2 DB across the wooded hills via passes of Dabo and La Petite Pierre, achieving objectives within 48 hours.
- November 22 Capture of Saverne and Phalsbourg; Gen Haislip authorizes Leclerc to drive on Strasbourg.
- November 23–24 Liberation of Strasbourg.
- December 16 German Ardennes offensive opens north of US Third Army sector, dominating Allied attention.
- 1945:
- January 2–3 2 DB moves west into Bitche-Sarreguemines area to protect northern Vosges.
- January 18 2 DB transferred to II Corps, French First Army for operations against Colmar Pocket.
- February 3 2 DB transferred to US XXI Corps for final stage of Colmar fighting.
- March 27 2 DB pulled out of the line for rest and reinforcement.
- April 8–17 2 DB armor and artillery units under Col de Langlade detached to *l'Armée de l'Ouest* to take part in reduction of Royan fortress on French Atlantic coast.
- April 22 GT Guillebon with divisional infantry cross Rhine at Benheim, attached to XV Corps, and thereafter advance to Augsburg.
- April 28 Bulk of 2 DB links up at Hall, under US XXI Corps.
- May 4 Advance elements of 2 DB enter Berchtesgaden.
- May 7 Unconditional surrender of German forces.
- May 25 Leclerc promoted *général de corps d'armée* (four-star).

1940–43: LA COLONNE LECLERC

Leclerc's mission to persuade the local administrations and garrisons across the vast geography of France's colonies in sub-Saharan Africa to rally to De Gaulle must have seemed dauntingly ambitious, but it was known that the obedience of some officers and officials to Vichy was wavering. His first objective was to contact the authorities in French Equatorial Africa (particularly the colonies of Tchad and Cameroun) to establish FFL control of the area, and from there to woo Gabon and the rest of French West Africa. The mission was timed to coincide with a Royal Navy operation to neutralize Vichy French naval forces at Dakar in Senegal. In the event, the attempt to land FFL troops on the Senegalese coast was a failure, and the Vichy navy's will to fight proved greater than anticipated. Despite this setback for De Gaulle's cause, the charismatic Leclerc quickly rallied a small core of supporters in Tchad to help him execute his plans. This was a testament to his character, given the natural suspicion that tough, cynical Colonial soldiers felt for an aristocratic cavalryman.

Cameroun was the first colony to declare its loyalty to the Free French on August 26, 1940, followed by Tchad and the French Congo over the following two days. Captains Louis Dio of the Régiment de Tirailleurs Sénégalais du Tchad (RTST) and Jacques de Guillebon of the Artillerie Coloniale were among the very first officers to heed Leclerc's call to arms, and would go on to serve him tirelessly throughout the rest of the war. Dio, stationed at Douala, led his company of African riflemen to join Leclerc on August 27 – a symbolic act in the transformation of French Equatorial Africa into an FFL bastion. De Guillebon, a fine organizer who later filled staff roles, was charged with communications in Leclerc's fledgling force as they prepared to expand their foothold.

Over the next two months Leclerc built a heterogeneous little force of Colonial infantry, cavalry, camel-riders, engineers and artillery around elements from the oversized RTST (the latter was a "regiment" only in name, actually mustering some 6,500 men in 30 companies divided between four regional commands). This collection of African soldiers with French officers, senior NCOs and some specialist rankers became known to posterity as *La Colonne Leclerc*; its officers were resourceful, all ranks were desert-hardened, but their weapons were obsolescent, their vehicles underpowered, and they were short of radios. While he prepared this improvised force, Leclerc attempted to persuade the political and military leadership of the West African colonies to join the FFL, but the authorities in the most important, Senegal, could not be convinced, and their garrison was too strong to threaten with force. Leclerc was able to welcome De Gaulle to Douala in October 1940, and he and his men were congratulated for their quick and relatively bloodless

Douala harbour, Cameroun, October 8, 1940: Maj Leclerc (center) welcomes Gen de Gaulle (right), leader of the FFL. For this important occasion Leclerc wears smart tropical whites, without the assumed ranking of colonel which De Gaulle would now confirm. Normally Leclerc was relaxed about his appearance, and was photographed in various hard-worn items of Colonial uniform.



fulfillment of their mission. Operations against the Vichy French in Gabon began immediately, and succeeded by November 12 at the cost of 40 French lives and two Vichy naval vessels, but further progress in French West Africa proved impossible.

On November 22, 1940 Leclerc's efforts were rewarded with confirmation of his locally assumed rank of colonel and appointment as the military governor of Tchad, and on December 3 as CO of the Régiment de Tirailleurs Sénégalais du Tchad headquartered at Fort Lamy. Assisted by the experienced Saharan soldier LtCol Jean Colonna d'Ornano, Leclerc began laying plans for raids northwards against Italian forces in Libya. Britain's Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) was already active in the area, though at the limit of its logistic range from Egypt, so it collaborated with Leclerc's men in testing the viability of raiding Italian outposts in southern Libya with truck-borne columns. D'Ornano was killed at the head of the French contingent in the first joint LRDG–FFL raid on the Italian airstrip at Mourzouk on January 11, 1941, when they destroyed three Italian aircraft and looted the nearby fort, and during the next few months Leclerc's camel troops set up supply dumps to support LRDG operations. He became convinced of the strategic value of long-range raids into Libya from Tchad; they provided a practical and visible means of striking at the enemy, and generated excellent propaganda for the tiny FFL force.

A

AFRICA, 1940–42

The uniforms, equipment, vehicles, and markings of the first Free French units in Africa and the Middle East were all extremely varied. The *Colonne Leclerc* of 1940–42 was composed of Colonial and Saharan garrison troops, wearing a mixture of prewar uniforms augmented with local manufactures in France's African colonies after these declared for De Gaulle.

(1) Lieutenant, Troupes Coloniales; Koufra Oasis, May 1941

Like most in these plates, this is a composite figure from photos and surviving items; officers' privately-purchased uniforms were particularly varied. Instead of the regulation French M1931 cork sun helmet this officer has an Egyptian-made pith helmet; it displays the gilt fowl-anchor badge of the Colonial Troops, a distinct corps of the French Army which administered and led the African *tirailleurs* who made up the bulk of Leclerc's manpower. The short-sleeved bush jacket was made in Brazzaville in the French Congo, and bears a lieutenant's two gold rank *galons* on black shoulder-strap slides. The very broad, loose *sarouel* Saharan trousers, with decorative knots stitched around the side pockets, are worn with *samara* sandals. The holstered revolver is the M1892.

(2) Tirailleur, Régiment de Tirailleurs Sénégalais du Tchad; Fort Lamy, winter 1940–41

This very large regiment (6,500 all ranks, including 460 Europeans, dispersed across the colony) provided most of the pool from which Leclerc formed his mobile units; the recruits were in fact local, not from the West African colony of Senegal itself. The red *chéchia* has a pale khaki cover. In hot weather the RTST wore lightweight pale khaki collarless shirts and knee-length shorts, usually with sandals, but in winter this double-breasted, mustard-khaki woolen *paletot colonial* was worn with matching *culottes*, and puttees and boots. The collar and cuffs are trimmed with the traditional yellow tape of the

Senegalese Rifles units; a yellow anchor was normally displayed on the collars, but this rifleman has locally-made collar patches complete with double yellow upper piping. A shortage of leather equipment was partly answered by canvas belt, suspender and pouch equipment made in Brazzaville. The weapon is the 8mm Berthier M1907/15 rifle. (Articles by Didier Corbonnois in *Militaria* Nos. 252 & 254, July & September 2006)

(3) Marmon-Herrington Mk II armored car, Régiment de Marche de Spahis Marocains; North Africa, October 1942

Captain Jourdiere's 1er Escadron/ 1er RSM crossed from Syria into British Mandate Palestine on June 30, 1940 to join the Allied cause. It fought with a Free French "flying column" in Sudan and Eritrea, becoming 1er Groupe d'Escadrons in March 1941, and the Régiment de Marche de Spahis Marocains in October 1942. It was by then equipped with South African-made Marmon-Herrington armored cars, which appeared in many configurations with various Allied and captured armament; the Mk II officially mounted a .55in Boys AT rifle and a co-axial Bren, but the latter was sometimes replaced with a 7.92mm Besa. The markings were equally diverse, and no two photos seem to show exactly the same scheme. The Sharifian star of Morocco and the Cross of Lorraine formed the unit sign, but in differing styles and colors. Sub-unit badges were displayed on squat white shields on the turrets; this lion is unidentified, as is another shield showing a single black "ermine" motif from the heraldic arms of Brittany. Some but not all cars bore a large tactical number, and some displayed along the side of the engine hood the lettering as (3a). At the end of the Syrian campaign (July 1941) the 1er Esc displayed the blue star voided, like the white star of 3ème Esc illustrated as (3b). The crewman wears the Moroccan Spahis' traditional red *calot* sidecap, and British KD clothing supplied to replace worn-out French M1935 khaki shirt and shorts summer uniform.





February 1941: Koufra

At the turn of the year Col Leclerc planned an ambitious raid to capture the major Italian post at Koufra. This complex of six oases had an airstrip and a fort with a 400-man garrison, and provided a base for the motorized *Compagnia Sahariana No. 19*, which potentially threatened the FFL's positions in Tchad. The column, preceded on the outward march by part of the LRDG's New Zealand-manned T Patrol, set out on January 23, 1941 to cover a distance of 500km (310 miles) from Faya-Largeau. It was a risky gamble: Leclerc could only take about 400 men and two artillery pieces,

Leclerc (fifth from right) photographed with British Long Range Desert Group personnel (who present a typical ruffianly appearance) in February or March 1942, during operations against the Italians in southern Libya. LRDG Patrols T (led by Maj Clayton) and G (Lt Crichton-Stuart) had been integrated with Leclerc's column for raids on the Italian airfield at Mourzouk in January 1941, and the Koufra Oasis base of an Italian Saharan Company in February–March.

because so much of the capacity of the 162 vehicles was needed for fuel and water. The trucks included 12 new Bedfords, but were mostly Matfords and elderly (sometimes cannibalized) Lafflys; there were two Laffly armored cars, two 75mm gun portees, two 37mm M1916 light trench guns, but numerous 8mm Hotchkiss machine guns and 7.5mm FM24/29 light machine guns. On January 30, in the Cherif hills 100km south of Koufra, the LRDG patrol was ambushed by Italian Saharan troops supported by three aircraft, and was destroyed, captured or forced to flee. Although the Italians did not detect the French column, the element of surprise had been lost.

Arriving near Koufra on February 7, Leclerc sent patrols forward, confirming that the Italians had concentrated in and around El Tag fort. After knocking out the aircraft on the airstrip most of the column laid up around the Sarra wells. Leclerc unleashed his small force against El Tag on February 18, leading to mobile fighting among the palm groves against the *Compagnia Sahariana* before the column managed to surround the fort. Fighting continued until the 28th, when the Italian commander sought a parley, and on March 1 the garrison capitulated. Without the means to care for them, Leclerc paroled his Italian prisoners to march back to their own lines (a decision more pragmatic than chivalrous).

Before withdrawing with his useful booty (14 intact vehicles, and 57 machine guns and automatic cannon), Leclerc took the opportunity to make a symbolic gesture. He asked his parading men to join him in swearing an oath: not to cease fighting for France's freedom until their flag flew once again from the cathedral of Strasbourg – the capital of the province of Alsace, and thus a symbol of the struggles against Germany since 1870. This small but iconic victory, the first won entirely by Free French troops since the Armistice, and the swearing of the "oath of Koufra," would be widely reported by Reuters news agency.

Like the *Colonne Leclerc*, the other Free French brigade serving under BrigGen Koenig with the British Army in the Middle East and North Africa was completely dependent on British support, and both were limited by their inability to recruit more than a trickle of volunteers from occupied France and modest numbers from Vichy units in the colonies. (After the capture of Syria in July 1941 only some 5,300 men joined the FFL, while 33,300 chose to be repatriated.) Leclerc relied almost completely on local manpower

to fill out his ranks, such as irregular cavalry units from Tchad like the Groupe Nomade du Tibesti. This limited his ambitions in the summer of 1941 to achieving what was possible with the forces that he could muster. Meanwhile, the newly promoted BrigGen Leclerc (who was sentenced to death *in absentia* by Vichy when his identity was discovered) continued to badger the British for ever more trucks and heavier weapons, and modeled his flexible “reconnaissance and combat” motorized companies on the LRDG.

February–March 1942: the Fezzan

Leclerc calculated that, with enough supplies, his force might capture the sparsely defended Fezzan area of southern Libya, an expanse of rocky desert nearly as big as France, where operations might usefully distract Italian attention from the British Eighth Army’s operations further north. The logistics of fighting in this wasteland proved to be more difficult than anyone could have imagined, however, and operations had to follow the rhythm of the seasons. Leclerc’s plans had to be postponed repeatedly to build up his supplies and to enlarge his forces until February 1942, and even then the early Fezzan raids could not be sustained. The truck-borne Colonne Leclerc could fight dispersed in lightly armed raiding forces, depending on a handful of Free French Blenheim light bombers or on the RAF whenever air support could be included in the plan, but fuel, water and ammunition had to be painstakingly stockpiled in quantities that far surpassed early estimates. To the surprise of Leclerc’s men, Italian soldiers surrendered in numbers without resistance, and again had to be given parole. But holding captured areas was impossible given the FFL’s limited manpower, and the first campaign against the Fezzan was called off after only a few weeks following the capture of an Italian post at Tedjere in March. Leclerc waited for winter to resume operations, so throughout the summer of 1942 logistic stockpiles were prepared for a concerted advance north towards the Libyan capital, Tripoli, when the strategic situation allowed.

December 1942–January 1943: Fort Lamy to Tripoli

The British victory at El Alamein in early November 1942, and the consequent westwards retreat of the Axis forces, opened the way for Leclerc’s second Fezzan campaign that December. This oasis-hopping advance took the already badly weakened Italians by surprise; Leclerc and his senior subordinates had perfected the practice of operations by separate mobile columns, which advanced in parallel but could quickly converge on a single axis to strike where opportunity offered. Promoted lieutenant-colonel in September 1942, Louis Dio was increasingly charged with important detached operations at the head of “Groupement D,” and in November LtCol de Guillebon became Leclerc’s chief of staff. Although the weapons carried by the African infantrymen were still those of 1940 (at best), the tactics employed made every bullet count.

Leclerc (right) among his officers after the capture of Koufra Oasis in March 1941 – a major milestone in the history of the Leclerc Column and in its commander’s legend. After a serious riding accident while an instructor at Saumur in the 1930s, Leclerc walked with a cane for the rest of his days. Following the surrender of the Italian garrison, Leclerc and his men swore an oath to continue the fight until the French flag flew over Strasbourg cathedral once again. It would take them nearly four years to fulfil the oath, which became known as the *Serment de Koufra*.



General Leclerc ignored the potential complication of the brief but fierce resistance offered by the Vichy Army of Africa to the Anglo-US Operation “Torch” landings in Morocco and Algeria on November 8–12. This ended in a ceasefire, followed by long and tortuous negotiations to bring the ex-Vichy forces back into the war on the Allied side. Meanwhile, from December 13, Leclerc advanced northwards into and across Libya, with some 3,200 men in 350 vehicles. His first patrols met their British counterparts from January 13 onwards, and after leaving garrisons in captured Italian posts the rest of the Leclerc Column finally linked up with Eighth Army in Tripoli on January 26, 1943, just hours after the 51st Highland Div entered the city.

General Leclerc’s immediate meetings with Eighth Army’s commander, the notoriously difficult Gen Bernard Montgomery – at whose disposal he placed his troops – went surprisingly well. Montgomery was impressed by what Leclerc had achieved with his under-resourced command, and agreed to provide supplies, equipment and some weapons (though not the latest) from British stocks. The size of Leclerc’s renamed “L Force” grew, with the attachment of a British anti-tank regiment, a Free Greek unit, and elements from Gen Koenig’s 1ère Division des FFL. Well respected by the British, this 1st Free French Div had formed around De Gaulle’s original, largely Foreign Legion force dating from summer 1940 in the UK, which had since served in Eritrea and Syria, and had distinguished itself at Bir Hacheim in May–June 1942 and El Alamein in October–November.¹ (In August 1943 it became the FFL 1ère Division d’Infanterie Motorisée, and soon afterwards the 1ère Division de Marche d’Infanterie (1st Inf Marching Div, 1 DMI – a temporary “task force” formation). This served first with Gen Juin’s French Expeditionary Corps in Italy, and subsequently in De Lattre’s French First Army in southern France and Germany.)

1 Frequent unit redesignations made the history of the Free French in 1940–43 extremely complicated; for basic facts see Osprey Men-at-Arms 238, *Foreign Volunteers of the Allied Forces 1943–45*, pp.24–34.

B

M4A2 SHERMAN CORSE, 3ème PELOTON, 2ème ESCADRON/ 12ème RÉGIMENT DE CHASSEURS D’AFRIQUE; NW EUROPE, 1944–45

This Sherman, *immatriculation* number 420050, survived the war from Utah Beach to Berchtesgaden, although it had a lucky escape at Dompierre on the night of September 12/13, 1944. The tank of 3rd Ptn commander Adj-Chef Titeux in the Sub-Group Massu, it was hit by two incendiary smoke shells which set its exterior alight, but it survived, and the crew went on to distinguish themselves the next day. The original hull with a replacement turret is preserved today, correctly marked, at the French Army’s Tank Museum at Saumur. For clarity, the tank is illustrated without the stowage that it carried while on campaign; this included a strip of five track plates down the center of the glacis plate, and a road wheel in front of the driver’s position.

(1) The turret number, 35, is painted in white. The right-side hull markings are (rear to front) a tricolor thinly outlined in white; a yellow-on-blue tactical sign – the “C” flanked by the two vertical bars of 12 RCA, with a sideways “tick” at the top and bottom of the left-hand bar identifying 2nd Sqn (note difference from the tac sign displayed by the same squadron’s *Romilly* on Plate D); the tank name (*Corsica*) in yellow; the division sign; and the black bridge tonnage “30” on a yellow disc.

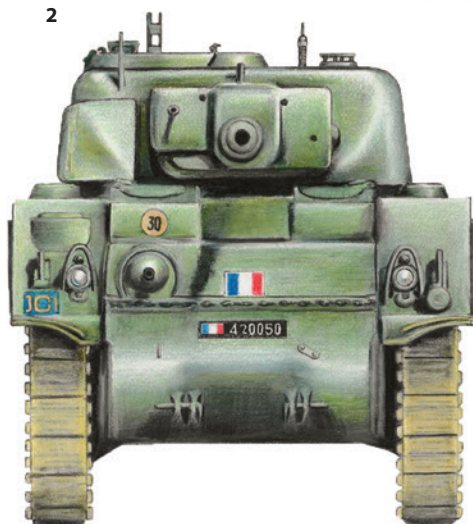
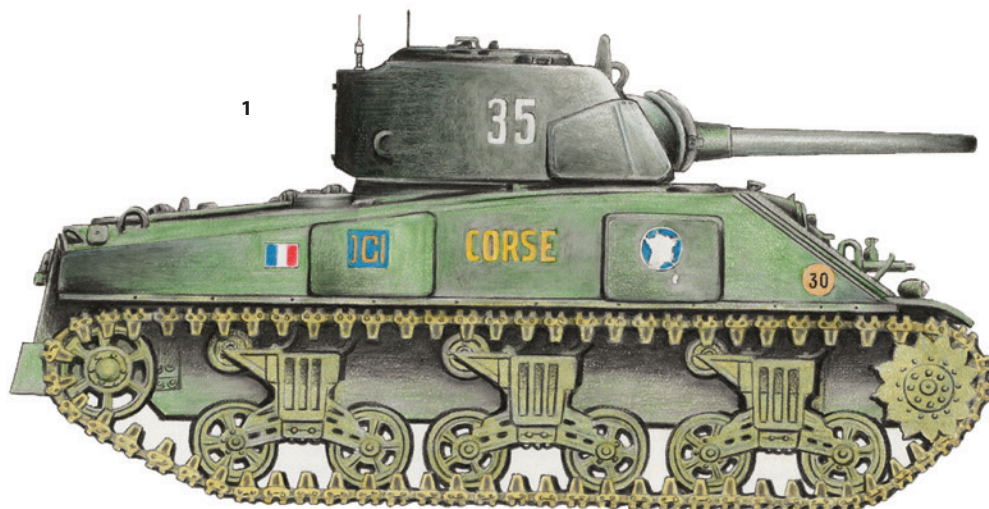
(2) The frontal markings repeat the bridge-class in front of the co-driver’s position; the tricolor centered on the glacis; the tac sign above the right trackguard; and the tank number 420050 headed by a small tricolor on a black strip centered on the nose.

(3) The *immatriculation* number of *Corse*.

(4) A unique peculiarity of this tank was the crew’s addition to the division sign of a little white “Corsica map” positioned relative to the map of France. Reportedly, Gen Leclerc himself ordered this removed when he spotted it in February 1944, but the crew kept it until the end of the war.

(5) **Sous-lieutenant, 12ème RCA, parade dress**

Pictured during a decoration parade, this North African second lieutenant wears the regiment’s sky-blue *calot* or *bonnet de police*; another variant cut like the US overseas cap had a lemon-yellow top fold and piping around the edges of the turn-up. At the front of the crown his rank is indicated by a single chevron of lace in cavalry silver. His standard uniform of US Army shirt, necktie, wool trousers and Parsons “M1941” field jacket, worn with pistol belt, web leggings and russet boots, has been dressed up for the occasion with the traditional waist sash of North African cavalry, and the pin-on badges of the 2ème DB above that of the 12ème RCA (see Plates H1 & H5).





Factional rivalries following Operation "Torch"

Winter 1942–43 was a period of intense political activity by Gen de Gaulle, former Vichy politico-military figures, and the US and British governments. Despite his prickly relationship with Prime Minister Churchill, Britain backed the still officially unrecognized De Gaulle as leader of the Free French, but the Americans – doubting that he could ever command the loyalty of former Vichy troops – initially preferred the pliable but less dynamic Gen Giraud of *l'Armée d'Afrique*. De Gaulle named Leclerc as Commandant des Troupes de l'Afrique Française Libre, and to the political post of Haut Commissaire de l'Afrique Française Libre, in order to cement Leclerc's

Near Tripoli on January 26, 1943, Leclerc first met Gen Montgomery, GOC British Eighth Army. The FFL commander still wears an old *paletot coloniale*, and a battered khaki-covered képi bearing brigadier-general's insignia improvised with two silver stars taken from an Italian uniform. The meeting was long and cordial; Montgomery's GSO 1 Col Charles Richardson called Leclerc "a very English Frenchman," and Montgomery was confident that "we can do something with these men." When Leclerc's L Force later faced a heavy German armored counterattack on the British left flank at Ksar Rhilane on March 10, Montgomery privately gave them up for lost: "This brave man Leclerc – he's very nice, but now we won't see him again." His signal to Leclerc after the latter's victory was characteristically terse, however, saying simply "Well done!"

legitimacy vis-à-vis other French officers as the rivalries emerged between "Gaullists" and "Giraudists."

The mood of *l'Armée d'Afrique* was ambiguous: while grudgingly accepting their dependence on the USA, many of its leaders nursed animosity towards both the British and their Gaullist allies. In the simplest terms, Giraudist ex-Vichy and Gaullist officers regarded each other with mutual suspicion; the former resented the latter's largely disdainful attitude towards them, and this hostility was warmly returned by men who had borne the burden alone since 1940. Complex factional and personal quarrels were pursued, including by open competition for recruits and resources, and this hampered the assembly of Allied French national forces during 1943.

L Force: Tunisia, March–May 1943

Meanwhile, access to Eighth Army's supply chain permitted Leclerc to re-equip his force and replace his transport. The impending advance westwards and northwards, while British First Army and US II Corps (with ex-Vichy French support) simultaneously advanced eastwards from Morocco, was aimed at squeezing the Germans and Italians out of Tunisia. Montgomery intended to use L Force to cover Eighth Army's left flank for the advance on the Axis Mareth Line, subordinated at first to Gen Freyberg's 2nd New Zealand Div and later directly to X Corps. The advance began on February 20, 1943, and Leclerc's men fought their first action against German forces on March 6. They fought again, with notable distinction, on the 10th, when they drove back repeated German armored counterattacks at Ksar Rhilane. Leclerc's operations were conducted boldly despite the delays imposed by the winter rain and mud during the push into mountainous terrain. L Force adapted well, seeing battle again at Djebel Hatleb between March 22 and 25, and capturing Gabès on the 29th.

An important addition was made to L Force from March 10, when the *Colonne Volante* commanded by Maj Jean Rémy came under command,

bringing two squadrons of armored cars and one of Crusader tanks. Rémy's and Leclerc's backgrounds could not have been less similar: as an adventurous teenager, the former had enlisted in the White Russian cavalry in 1917, and joined the French *Armée d'Orient* in 1919. Commissioned in 1923, in 1939 Capt Rémy was serving with the 1er Régiment de Spahis Marocains at Aleppo, Syria. One squadron defected to the British in June 1940 (see under Plate A), and after the armistice following the Allied invasion of Syria in 1941 Capt Rémy was one of the minority of the garrison who chose the FFL rather than repatriation. He helped organize the 1er Régiment de Marche de Spahis Marocains (1 RMSM); in September 1942 this joined Eighth Army as the nucleus of the "Flying Column," with 24 armored cars alongside the 14 Crusader tanks of the 1ère Compagnie de Chars de la France Libre, and this unit distinguished itself with Koenig's brigade at El Alamein in October–November. With Rémy's armored spearhead, L Force now began to resemble an all-arms combat group rather than the light desert raiders of previous campaigns.

L Force continued its run of hard-fought victories as part of Eighth Army, at Djebel Garci, at Oued Akarit on April 9 and Kairouan on April 12. On May 7 units of First Army captured Tunis itself, and on the 13th all Axis troops in North Africa were surrendered to British, US and French forces. When the victorious Allies paraded through Tunis on May 20, Leclerc's men marched with Eighth Army rather than the Army of Africa, whom they regarded as belated "fair-weather" converts to the cause.

1943: 2ème DIVISION BLINDÉE

Building a new army and a new division

The Americans eventually tired of their dalliance with Gen Giraud, although it was only from September 1943 that De Gaulle would officially shoulder him aside. No other leader emerged who enjoyed the loyalty De Gaulle commanded among the FFL, and contacts with elements of the Resistance had also started to earn him a base of political support in occupied France. The rancor between the hardcore 1940 Gaullists and the former Vichy



At Thiès base north of Dakar, Senegal, 1942, the three-man crew of Somua No. 21, one of 23 tanks deployed to the colony the previous year, take a break during training. The lack of spare parts and limited 47mm ammunition hampered their activities, and the humid climate was not favorable to the S35's comparatively fragile engine and transmission. Designated as 12ème Groupement Autonome des Chasseurs d'Afrique (12ème GACA) and commanded by LtCol de Langlade, all 23 tanks were made combat-ready and moved to Morocco to fight in the winter 1942/43 Tunisian campaign. Six were lost in action; while still effective, the Somuas were outgunned, and entirely lacked radios. When incorporated into the reborn 12ème Chasseurs d'Afrique in 2ème Division Blindée, already freshly equipped with M4A2s, some crews took the Somua manufacturer's plates off their old tanks and fixed them to the front armor of their Shermans.

Seen in Temara, Morocco, in early 1944, a Bedford MWD truck carries a non-finalized 2ème DB divisional sign; the *Croix de Lorraine* is not yet included on the map of France. Most of the final markings were actually applied during the training period that followed the division's move to England. The officer in service dress uniform to the right of the marking is Maj Jacques Massu, who commanded II/ RMT and later the Sous-Groupement Massu of Groupement Tactique Langlade.



commanders in North Africa took many months to overcome, but the latter's successful incorporation was essential to the FFL's further prosecution of the war.

Moving back eastward to Sabratha in Libya on May 30, L Force was now redesignated the *2ème Division des Forces Françaises Libre* (2 DFFL). While contemptuous of attempts by some French leaders to airbrush the Vichy years out of history in a gust of noisy patriotism, Gen Leclerc concentrated on building up his new command around the leaders and cadres of his old units. New personnel came from various backgrounds in French North Africa; some were keenly attracted by Leclerc's fame, but the process of incorporation was not always easy, given the intimate relationships that had been forged within the original small units of exiles. (Some new units even hesitated to paint the Cross of Lorraine marking on the new divisional sign of a map of France.)

Major Jean Rémy was promoted colonel, and proved vital in incorporating former Vichy soldiers into his Moroccan Spahis regiment, which became a highly trained armored reconnaissance unit. Lieutenant-Colonel Dio was also promoted to colonel, at the head of a three-battalion Régiment de Marche du Tchad (RMT) formed from a motley multi-national *Corps Franc d'Afrique* under many of the old RTST's Colonial cadre. The segregated US Army which was now equipping and training the division insisted on the removal of the regiment's African rank-and-file, which appalled the old desert hands of *La Coloniale* such as Maj Jacques Massu. (This racist *blanchiment* seems shocking, but in practice most of the African veterans were simply transferred

to the more color-blind 1 DMI, and others were presumably happy enough to return home after more than two years' hard campaigning. Other units of Leclerc's division, such as the RMSM and 12 RCA, continued to be mixed European and North African, as indeed was the Corps Franc to some extent.)

Among officers who had obeyed the Vichy regime (as often under the pressure of circumstances as by choice) the second chance represented by the FFL's expansion was attractive, and their "reliability" was often determined through prewar connections. In June 1943, Gen Leclerc was reacquainted with LtCol Baron Paul de Langlade, who had commanded the Somua tank squadron of the 12ème Groupe Autonome de Chasseurs d'Afrique in action against the Germans in Tunisia. De Langlade was a wounded hero of World War I who had retrained as a bomber pilot, rising to squadron leader by 1919, before returning to the cavalry in Africa and subsequently converting to armor. By sheer force of personality De Langlade had led 12 GACA since 1940, bringing it up from Senegal to drive into Tunisia alongside the Allies. His officers (notably Capt Gribius and Rouvillois) were also experienced armored soldiers, who would later make their mark in the *Division Leclerc*. The 2 DFLL incorporated 12 GACA as the nucleus of its tank regiment, 12ème Régiment de Chasseurs d'Afrique (12 RCA).

On August 23, 1943 the 2 DFLL was redesignated the *2ème Division Blindée* (2nd Armored Division – 2 DB), and moved to Temara near the port of Casablanca in Morocco, through which it would receive its new American equipment. The 12 RCA was divided in September 1943, using half to create the reborn 12ème Régiment de Cuirassiers (12 RC). Commanded by LtCol Louis Warabiot from the 12 RCA, this second tank unit was completed with squadrons from the 2ème and 4ème Régiments de Chasseurs d'Afrique. The division's third (and most "Gaullist") armor regiment was created around the 1ère Compagnie de Chars de la France Libre from Rémy's Colonne Volante and a 2ème CCFL, these forming the nucleus for the 501ème Régiment de Chars de Combat (501 RCC). In September 1943, De Langlade was promoted to full colonel alongside Dio, as the commanders of the division's first two US-style Combat Commands.



Morocco, 1943: a 12ème RCA crew training on a brand-new Sherman M4A2. A narrow tricolor flash, a serial number and shipping stencils are the only visible markings at this stage, and the crew still wear French equipment, including steel M1935 tank helmets. The side sand shields would soon disappear from the tanks, and locally improvised stowage boxes would be added to the rear of the Sherman turrets and on the hulls to accommodate the personal and bivouac kit so precious to crews on campaign.

In the 2ème DB the challenge of taking over new, modern equipment was actually minimal when compared to that of merging individuals from different backgrounds – long-time Gaullists, with ex-members of the Vichy army – into a cohesive fighting force.

As an armored division modeled on US Army tables of equipment, the new 2 DB received brand new M4A2 Shermans, halftracks, self-propelled artillery and a host of other American weapons – riches of which Leclerc had previously only been able to dream. (Genuinely respectful of the French military hierarchy, he actually argued with De Gaulle that he was too junior to accept the rank of divisional general to which he was now promoted, and long delayed actually “putting up” his third star.) By late 1943 the 2 DB included the cohort of officers who had served Leclerc since 1940; about 4,000 men who had served in L Force or in other FFL units; 7,000 former Vichy officers and men; and 3,000 new recruits from French North Africa, some of them French “*évadés*” (escapees) who had fled there via Spain. The leaders of the new units joined Dio, De Guillebon, De Langlade and Rémy as Leclerc’s colonels, and junior officers who had served under Leclerc since Tchad were appointed to important (often staff) roles. Leclerc’s men would soon be fighting side by side to liberate France, and whatever his personal feelings he stressed the absolute need for patriotic unity despite their former political differences.

The 2 DB comprised three tank regiments, a three-battalion regiment of mechanized infantry, and three self-propelled armored artillery *groupes* (equivalent to US battalions), plus divisional troops including a headquarters, a reconnaissance regiment, a tank destroyer regiment, an engineer battalion, an antiaircraft battalion, a medical battalion, and divisional services. For tactical purposes it was divisible into three US-style Combat Commands (termed *Groupements Tactiques* – GTs – in the 2 DB.) These were adapted to

C M3 HALFTRACK AMIRAL BUIZA, 9ème COMPAGNIE, III BATAILLON/ RÉGIMENT DE MARCHE DU TCHAD; CENTRAL PARIS, EVENING 24 AUGUST 1944

The “Colonne Dronne” from Groupement Tactique V (Col Billotte), which entered Paris by the Porte d’Italie at perhaps 2045hrs on August 24 – the first troops to penetrate the capital – included the 1st Platoon (*section*) of 2nd Company/ 501st Combat Tanks Regiment (see Plate D); an element from 3rd Co/ 13th Engineer Regiment; and the mechanized infantry of 2nd and 3rd Platoons, 9th Co, III Bn/ Tchad Marching Regiment. The latter platoon’s M3 halftracks were 409574 *Tunisie 43*, 415066 *Brunete*, 406101 *Amiral Buiza*, 95124 *Guadalajara 2*, and 410621 *Santander*. Four of these names reflected the very many ex-Republican Spanish soldiers in 9th Co, which was popularly called *La Nueve* (“the Nine”) in Spanish. *Amiral Buiza* was named after the commander of the Republican Navy.

(1) The halftrack is shown with typical stowage, including jerry cans, slung packs, yellow-painted M1 antitank mines in the side racks, and a large US Army camouflage net strapped to the rear. The regiment’s yellow-on-blue tactical sign on the hull side indicates III Bn by its three enclosing bars, and 9th Co by the “tick” on the upper bar.

(2) The front fender ends and rear fenders were painted white. The vehicle name was painted above the armored radiator louvers; the division and tactical signs on the mudguards; and the 8-ton bridge-class disc and the *immatriculation* number on the fender. The Allied thick-ringed white star for ground-air recognition was painted on the hood top of some but not all halftracks of this unit, and was not seen on *Amiral Buiza* when it paraded in May 1945.

(3) The name above the radiator armor.

(4) Detail of the rear right hull showing the stenciled vehicle number and tricolor.

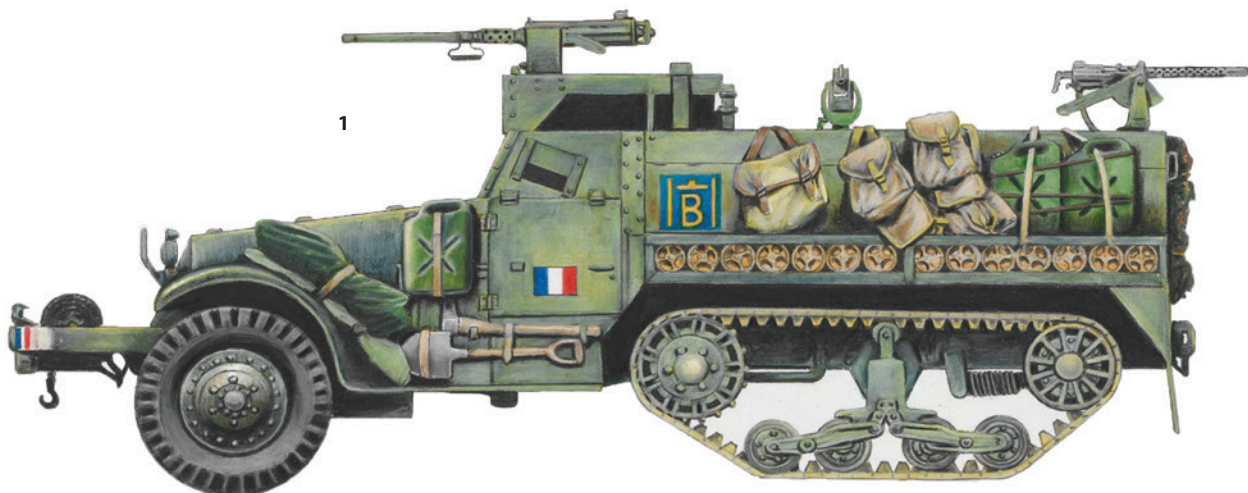
(5) Rifleman, II/ RMT

This soldier from the Sub-Group Minjonnet of GT Langlade, which entered Paris on August 25 via the Pont de Sèvres, wears standard combat dress with an olive drab vehicle overall, as issued to mechanized infantry; photos show this model with a single flapped left chest pocket and two big thigh pockets. He is armed with an M1 Garand and wears US web equipment, with the “front” suspenders rolled up *en escargot* in the French fashion. Soldiers of 2ème DB frequently wore the pin-on division badge on combat clothing, and this man’s regiment is identified by the yellow-painted helmet anchor. While I & III Bn personnel might display the standard foul-anchor of the *Troupes Coloniales*, the CO of the “Bataillon Massu” introduced a variant with V-shaped flukes, recalling the Cross of Agadès symbol of Saharan troops. Photos show it being worn in Paris by 7th Co, which on the afternoon of August 24 had had a hard fight at the village of Jouy-en-Josas, where some were riding the Shermans of 4/ 12 RCA.

(6) Sergeant, 9ème Cie, III/ RMT

A sergeant’s surviving *calot*, of the pattern resembling a US overseas cap, is in the Colonial Troops’ navy blue with red piping. It displays a gold lace rank chevron with red edging on the front of the crown, the RMT’s pin-on breast badge (see Plate H3) on the right front, and the Colonial Troops’ anchor on the left front. (Didier Corbonnois, *Militaria* No. 229, August 2004)

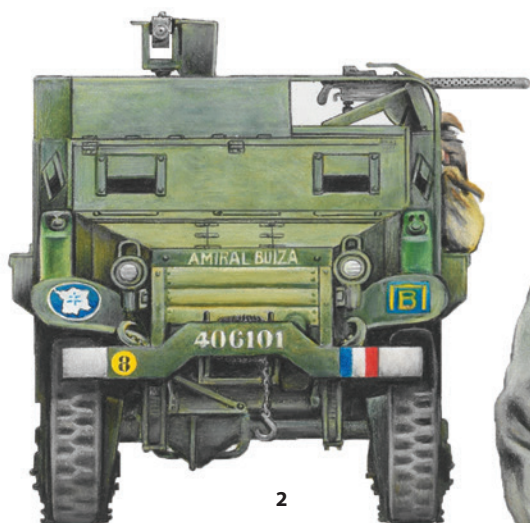
(7) Modified helmet badge, II/ RMT.



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AMIRAL BUIZA



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At the end of April 1944 the division moved from Morocco to Great Britain. This M3A3 light tank, *D'Abzac*, served in the division's Headquarters Protection Company, an *ad hoc* creation essentially composed of three light tank platoons detached from the three armored battalions. *D'Abzac* came from the 501^{ème} Régiment de Chars de Combat; at the time the HQ Protection Co was commanded by 501^{ème} RCC's Capt Alain de Boissieu (who later became the son-in-law of General de Gaulle).



suit Leclerc's doctrine of mobile warfare. Each normally included an armor regiment with an establishment of 54 tanks; a mechanized battalion of the RMT with halftracks; an armored reconnaissance squadron of the Spahis with light tanks or armored cars; a squadron of self-propelled armored tank destroyers; a self-propelled armored field artillery battalion; an engineer company; and a command and support group including a medical company. Each GT was usually divided for operations into two *sous-groupements* (sub-groups), whose compositions varied (see example on page 37), plus a reserve.

The shortage of FFL manpower dictated some unusual arrangements. The division's tank destroyer battalion, the Régiment Blindé de Fusiliers-Marins (RBFM), consisted of naval personnel surplus to the Free French Navy's available number of warships. Its medical battalion included two detachments of female ambulance crews (known popularly as the *Rochambelles* and *Marinettes*), and one of British Quaker conscientious objectors seconded from Eighth Army at Leclerc's request.

Preparations in the UK

Leclerc's rapid promotion by Gen de Gaulle to three-star general was a cause for resentment among ex-Vichy officers, and it would have been made difficult for him to serve under older generals such as Juin and De Lattre de Tassigny. These were appointed to head complete French corps for operations in the Mediterranean theater (Italy, and subsequently the south of France), but for the liberation of Northwest Europe planned for 1944 De Gaulle agreed that the 2 DB, alone of the FFL formations, should serve under an Allied corps command. Trained and close to full strength, the 2 DB was shipped to the United Kingdom in April and May 1944 to prepare for its imminent mission. Based in Yorkshire, the division was assigned to Gen Patton's US Third Army, to serve in Gen Wade Haislip's US XV Corps alongside the 5th Armored and 44th and 79th Infantry Divisions. Leclerc's personal relationships with Patton and Haislip were excellent. (After the division landed in Normandy, however, there were occasions when the requirements placed on Leclerc by

De Gaulle's agenda caused friction with the American chain of command.)

In the meantime, quarrels within the division had not yet been completely extinguished. The most prominent of these came to a head in July 1944, between Gen Leclerc and the commander of GT V (built around 501 RCC and III/ RMT), Col Malaguti, a choleric and disrespectful veteran of 1940 tank fighting who could not accept the new tactical arrangements. His replacement by Col Warabiot of 12 RC was announced, but then Gen de Gaulle imposed his own former chief of staff, Col Pierre Billotte, to take over GT V in time for the division's landing in Normandy (Warabiot was transferred to 501 RCC instead). Though a diehard Gaullist like Leclerc, Billotte was regarded as politically ambitious, and sometimes proved to be an argumentative subordinate. Leclerc was a strong personality; he discussed his operation plans in depth as they were being worked out, but did not tolerate protests or questioning of his orders once they had been issued. He pushed his officers and men to their limits wherever a situation warranted, but rewarded them with genuine loyalty. With few exceptions, Leclerc's men judged his leadership to be firm, just, inspiring – and lucky.

UNIT COMPOSITION

Armor

The three regiments differed only slightly, and most obviously in that the 501 RCC continued the traditions of the old *Artillerie Speciale*, so its



The tactical markings and turret number 35 identify this Sherman M4A2 as *Amboise*, Lt Desforges's platoon command tank of 1er Peloton, 3ème Escadron/ 12ème Régiment de Cuirassiers. This picture was taken during the move towards the division's embarkation ports during the last weeks of July 1944, which naturally attracted the keen attention of local youngsters. Note that the tanks have been waterproofed for wading, indicated by the sealing of the bow machine gun.



Final preparations for embarkation for the M10 tank destroyer *Le Malin* of 1er Peloton, 3ème Escadron/ Régiment Blindé de Fusiliers-Marins. The RBFM, composed of naval personnel, was the last unit to join the division, and Gen Leclerc gave them a stiff welcome, reflecting his personal mistrust of the French Navy after the fall of France in June 1940. His confidence in the RBFM grew after the division's first operations in Normandy, however; Capt Maggiar's Navy gunners proved highly skilled, and had even acquired naval range-finders to improve the performance of their 3-inch guns.



Seen in Morocco during the divisional build-up, this is an M4A1 half-track 81mm mortar carrier of the *Compagnie d'accompagnement* of II/ RMT. These battalion Support Companies fielded half-track-mounted command, reconnaissance, mortar, and (latterly) machine-gun platoons, as well as a self-propelled howitzer platoon with three 75mm M8 Howitzer Motor Carriages (HMCs).

Le Vengeur, an M7 105 mm howitzer (known as a "Priest" to the British) belonging to 1ère Section, 1ère Batterie/ 3ème Régiment d'Artillerie Coloniale. Each of the division's three self-propelled field artillery battalions had 27 M7s, officially organized in three batteries of nine howitzers, divided into three fire sections. However, the fact that each gun had its own ammunition half-track and trailer meant that they could be flexibly deployed depending upon the tactical situation and available assets. This vehicle was photographed entering Paris; from the caps worn instead of steel helmets, we can assume that the fighting had ceased.

sub-units were termed *compagnies* and *sections* rather than *escadrons* and *pelotons* in the cavalry style followed by 12 RCA and 12 RC.

501ème Régiment de Chars de Combat
Command & Services Company ("Cie Hors Rang"):

Command platoon (jeeps, Dodge 6x6 trucks, motorcycles)

Radio platoon (jeeps, Dodge 4x4 trucks, halftracks)

Recovery platoon (jeep, 3x M31 TRVs, 3x GMC 2½-ton trucks, 2x Ward La France wreckers)

Supply, and Forward Supply platoons (jeeps, GMC trucks)

Medical platoon (jeeps, 4x4 Dodge ambulances, half-track ambulance)

Headquarters Company ("Cie d'État Major"):

Light tank platoon (3x M3A3)

Medium tank platoon (3x M4A2)

Close support platoon (3x 105mm M4A3)

Mortar platoon (4x halftracks, 3x 81mm mortars)

Antitank platoon (2x 6x6 Dodge trucks + 57mm AT guns)

1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Combat Companies, each with:*

HQ (2x M4A2, 1x 105mm M4A3; radio squad; recovery squad; GMC supply truck)

1st, 2nd, and 3rd Combat Platoons (each 5x M4A2).

*After the liberation of Paris a *groupe franc* of locally recruited infantry was attached to 3rd Co, with Dodge 6x6 trucks and 57mm AT guns.

12ème Régiment de Chasseurs d'Afrique

As 501 RCC, except without *groupe franc*, and from September 1, 1944 the HQ Sqn also had an organic Reconnaissance platoon with jeeps and halftracks.

12ème Régiment de Cuirassiers

As 12 RCA.





The 2ème DB's anti-aircraft unit, 22ème Groupe Colonial de Forces Terrestres Antiaérienne, was equipped with this unique type of vehicle. It consisted of a 40mm Bofors AA gun mounted on a heavily-modified GMC CCKW 6x6 truck; about 40 trucks were rebuilt to a common standard in Morocco, providing the usually-towed Bofors with excellent mobility. The 22ème GC-FTA was composed of four batteries, each divided into two fire sections of four gun-trucks. This is *Gatroum*, the fourth gun of the 1ère Section, 1ère Batterie.

Reconnaissance: Régiment de Marche de Spahis Marocains

Headquarters Squadron ("Esc d'État Major")

Services Squadron ("Esc Hors Rang"):

Similar to tank regiments, including Administrative, Recovery and Medical platoons

1st Combat Squadron:

Command platoon (2x M3A3, later M5A1 light tanks)

Administrative, and Services platoons

1st, 2nd, and 3rd Combat Platoons (each 4x M3A3/M5A1 light, later M4A2/ M4A3/ M4A1 medium tanks)

Plus, from October 18, 1944, 4th Combat Platoon (1x M5A1, 3x M4A3)

2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th Combat Squadrons, each with:

Administrative, and Services platoons

1st, 2nd, and 3rd Combat Platoons (each 4x M8 armored cars, 1x M8 HMC)

Plus, from September 1 & October 21, 1944 respectively, *6th & 7th Combat Squadrons* with halftrack infantry and towed 57mm AT guns.

In the background is the Caterpillar angle-dozer *Bison* of HQ platoon, 3ème Compagnie/ 13ème Régiment du Génie, photographed in winter 1944. By the end of November the weather had deteriorated to a degree that severely hampered all maneuvers. The dozer crew are preparing to recover the M4 tank *Paris* of the Groupe d'Observation, 32ème Batterie/ 64ème Régiment d'Artillerie de Division Blindée.

Tank destroyers: Régiment Blindé de Fusiliers-Marins

Headquarters Squadron:

Command, Recovery, and Forward Supply platoons

Services Squadron:

Command, Supply, and Medical platoons

1st Combat Squadron:

Services, Pioneer, and Mortar platoons; Armored car platoon (jeeps, M8 & M20 armored cars)

1st and 2nd Combat Platoons (each 5x jeeps, 1x Dodge 4x4, 1x M20 armored reconnaissance car, 4x M10 TD)

2nd, 3rd, and 4th Combat Squadrons, each with:

Services platoon

1st, 2nd, and 3rd Combat Platoons (as above).



Normandy, mid-August 1944: the M3A3 light tank *Laure*, mount of Lt Le Goasguen, commander of 2ème Peloton, 1er Escadron/ Régiment de Marche de Spahis Marocains, is typically covered with kit bags, packs, jerry cans and spare track plates. The RMSM's 1st Sqn was entirely equipped with these Stuart light tanks (later, with Shermans), and the other four squadrons with M8 armored and M20 armored reconnaissance cars. This five-squadron strength, later increased to seven, allowed routine detachments to the division's *groupements tactiques*, including one commanded by the Spahis' Col Rémy.



Infantry: Régiment de Marche du Tchad

Regimental Headquarters Company:

Command, Radio, Administrative, and Protection platoons (12x jeeps, 8x halftracks, 5x Dodge 6x6, 4x GMC trucks)

I, II and III Battalions, each with:

Command platoon

Command & Services Company:

Command, Administrative & Supply, and Recovery platoons

Support Company ("Cie d'accompagnement"):

Command, Reconnaissance, Mortar, and (later) MG platoons (halftracks);

Howitzer platoon (3x M8 HMC)

1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Rifle Companies, each with:

Services platoon

1st, 2nd, and 3rd Rifle Platoons (each 5x halftracks, 1x 57mm AT gun)

Artillery

In addition to its combat assets, each of the division's three field artillery *groupes* also had its own *Colonne de Ravitaillement* (Resupply Column), including Command, Services, Supply, Workshop, and Medical sections.

I Groupe/ 3ème Régiment d'Artillerie Coloniale

Headquarters Battery ("Batterie d'État Major"):

Command, Reconnaissance & Survey, Observation, and Radio sections;

Fire-direction center; Antitank section (3x halftracks + 57mm guns)

32nd Aviation Section (2x Piper Cub aircraft)

1st, 2nd, and 3rd Fire Batteries (Batteries de Tir), each with:

Services, Observation, and Fire-Control sections

1st, 2nd, and 3rd Fire Sections (each 3x M7 105mm self-propelled howitzers, 3x ammo halftracks + trailers)

Plus, from January 1945, *4th Fire Battery* (M12 155mm SP howitzers)

I Groupe/ 40ème Régiment d'Artillerie Nord-Africain

As I/3 RAC, except: 31st Aviation Sect; and 4th Fire Battery, added August 16, 1944, had tanks (2x M3A3, 3x M4A2 75mm, 5x M4A3 105mm)

XI Groupe/ 64ème Régiment d'Artillerie de Division Blindée

As I/3 RAC, except: 27th Aviation Section; no 4th Fire Battery; and Fire Batteries numbered 31st, 32nd and 33rd.

22ème Groupe Colonial de Force Terrestre Antiaérienne

Command Battery:

Command, Radio, Supply, Repair, Ordnance, and Medical sections
1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Fire Batteries, each with:

Services section

1st and 2nd Fire Sections (each 4x truck-mounted 40mm Bofors AA guns).

Engineers: 13ème Régiment du Génie

Headquarters Company:

Command, Reconnaissance, Workshop, Bridging, and Medical platoons
Bridging Company:

Command platoon

1st and 2nd Bridging Platoons (Brockway trucks + Treadway bridges)

1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Combat Companies, each with:

Headquarters platoon (jeeps, GMC trucks, bulldozers, etc)

1st, 2nd, and 3rd Combat Platoons (jeeps, halftracks.)



On August 11, 1944, on Route 138 between Le Mans and Alençon, part of the 12ème Régiment de Cuirassiers was ambushed by elements of the retreating 9. Panzer-Division. A halftrack and five M4A2s were destroyed (including, here, *Brest* of the 3ème Peloton, 2ème Escadron.) The division suffered heavy losses during the Normandy campaign, partly due to the overeagerness of soldiers excited by their role as liberators. Combat experience gained in these early days quickly restored a sense of tactical reality.



Also on August 11, near the village of Champfleu: one of two PzKw IV Ausf J destroyed by the M4A2 *Brives La Gaillarde* of the 12th Cuirassiers' 2nd Platoon of 3rd Squadron. A Pak 40 75mm antitank gun was also destroyed in this action, after its crew managed to hit *Brives La Gaillarde* in one of the right-side suspension units. The regimental maintenance unit repaired the damaged bogie "temporarily," but the Sherman actually finished the European campaign with this "quick fix" still in place.

1944: FRANCE

August: Normandy

The 2 DB landed over Utah Beach in Normandy during the first few days of August 1944, a week after the beginning of Operation “Cobra” – the breakout battles at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula. From August 10, as the German counterattack around Mortain failed, XV Corps of Patton’s Third Army hooked east towards Alençon and then north towards Argentan, as part of the Allied encirclement of what became the Falaise Pocket. Lightly blooded near Mortain on August 8, the Leclerc Division fought its first real battle at Alençon on August 10–12, when GTs Dio and Langlade struck northward on either side of the town against elements of 9. Panzer-Division. Good progress was made, though at the cost of significant casualties, and on the 14th Leclerc was under fire with the Spahis in the southern suburbs of Argentan. (The general’s insistence on accompanying

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COLONNE DRONNE; CENTRAL PARIS, AUGUST 24–25, 1944

This force from Groupement Tactique V, which entered Paris at 2045hrs on August 24, consisted of mechanized infantry of an HQ platoon and two halftrack rifle platoons from 9ème Cie of III/ RMT (see Plate C); engineers in jeeps, a GMC truck and four halftracks of 2ème Section, 3ème Cie/ 13ème RG; and the M4A2 Shermans of Lt Michard’s 1ère Section, 2ème Cie/ 501ème Régiment de Chars de Combat. The tanks were 420613 *Romilly*, turret number 21; 420610 *Montmirail*, 20; and 420582 *Champaubert*, 24. The column’s HQ section comprised Capt Dronne’s jeep, 95122 *Mort aux Cons*; a command halftrack, 410782 *Les Cosaques*; and a recovery halftrack, 410301 *Rescousse*.

M4A2 Sherman Romilly, 1ère Section, 2ème Compagnie/ 501ème Régiment de Chars de Combat

Here, we imagine *Romilly* as halted at an FFI barricade while approaching the Hôtel de Ville at about 2100hrs on August 24, and the commander Adj Caron has dismounted to confer with Capt Dronne. The Sherman is marked (front to rear) with the blue-and-white division sign; the tank name, partly on the appliqué armor plate, in blue with white shadowing; the white-on-blue non-standard tactical sign of 2nd Co; and a small tricolor. The rear stowage seems from a photo to be two jerry cans flanking a welded-on metal-strap “basket” containing a large crate; this covers the markings on the rear plate, which would have been a tricolor, the tank number on a centered black strip, and the tac sign. On the rear deck the tank’s large canvas cover is roughly folded up, and attached to it is a ground-air recognition panel showing the cerise side.

(1) Adjudant Henri Caron

Omitting the usual overall, this shows the uniform worn with his US M1938 tanker’s helmet: wool shirt, necktie, wool trousers, Parsons field jacket, web M1936 pistol belt and leggings, all in various shades of US olive drab. His rank is worn as a silver stripe with a red centerline on a slide around his shoulder straps; pinned to his chest, though hidden here, are the division badge, and a wing-shaped badge (slang name, the “mosquito”) common to all Free French ground forces. A minority of personnel chose to display on the left sleeve a prewar tunic collar patch as a unit badge: here, a gold “501” on

a black lozenge with double top piping in the light grey branch color of the RCCs. Henri Caron, a respected and popular warrant officer, would be killed the following day while fighting on foot with a Thompson SMG. His platoon commander, Lt Michard, would subsequently be killed during the battle for the Colmar Pocket on January 28, 1945.

(2) Soldat de 2ème classe Roland Hoert

The tank’s loader/operator crouches on the rear deck, holding the tank’s issued Thompson SMG as he watches the windows for snipers. He has removed his tank helmet and put on the RCCs’ black beret, pulled right in the British fashion, with a silver badge of a knight’s helm superimposed on crossed cannons. He wears the one-piece vehicle overall without insignia. The rest of *Romilly*’s crew were Cpl/C François Jaouen (driver), Cpl Pierre Coatpehen (gunner), and Pte 2nd Class François Collon (co-driver).

(3) Capitaine Raymond Dronne, 9ème Cie, III/ RMT

The stockily-built, auburn-bearded company commander of *La Nueve* has left his jeep to check the surroundings and confer with Adj Caron. His M1 helmet displays the yellow-painted anchor of the Colonial Troops; his three gold rank *galons* are attached on a black backing to the front of his overall – a common French practice – and the division badge is pinned to his chest pocket. Photos show that his pistol belt supported a canteen behind the right hip, a holstered .45cal Colt M1911A1, an M1912 double pistol-magazine pouch, and an M1938 compass case.

(4) Enseigne de vaisseau 2ème classe, 2ème Esc/ Régiment Blindé de Fusiliers-Marins; morning, August 25

We have “compressed time” in order to include in the plate this junior officer from the 2ème DB’s tank-destroyer unit, the Naval Rifles Armored Regiment (RBFM), whose 2nd Sqn was also part of GT V; however, these units did not in fact link up with Dronne’s column until the morning of August 25. He wears the US tanker’s jacket, heavily badged: a rank stripe high on the chest, above the RBFM’s pin-on badge (see Plate H10), and on his sleeve the regiment’s arc-shaped “Fusiliers-Marins” title and crossed anchors patch, both in red on navy blue (the latter is crudely repeated on his helmet). He carries an M1 carbine, with a double magazine pouch on his pistol belt. This unit’s personnel also commonly wore US two-piece HBT fatigues over their wool uniforms. (Didier Corbonnois, *Militaria* No. 229, August 2004; Eric Brunet, *Militaria* No. 381, June 2017).



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August 12, 1944: the M5 halftrack *Picrocole* of the Régiment de Marche du Tchad entering Alençon in southern Normandy; again, note the heavy stowage. Deployed at the head of US XV Corps, the division took part in the maneuver intended to encircle the German Seventh Army in the Falaise-Argentan-Chambois triangle. From August 19–21 the 2ème DB took part in the reduction of this “Falaise Pocket,” but Leclerc did not want to engage his force fully because he was aware of the impending Resistance uprising in Paris.



This barricade in the Rue de Rennes was typical of the early days of the Paris uprising; it exemplifies the limited military capacity of the insurgents had the Germans decided to take resolute action across the city. Creating the circumstances for obtaining the surrender of Gen von Choltitz's garrison before they did so was a race against time, perfectly understood by Leclerc. The concise orders he gave for the 2ème DB's drive on Paris were only two pages long, and are still considered a model of clarity and brevity.



forward units in a jeep or his M3 command tank *Tailly* drove his staff to distraction.)

The battle had proved the effectiveness of the usual Tactical Group organizations, and these would demonstrate both growing cohesion and flexibility over the months to come:

Groupeement Tactique D (Col Dio)

12 RC; I/ RMT; 1 Batterie/ 3 RAC; 2 Bat/ 22 GC-FTA; 4 Esc/ RMSM; 3 Esc/ RBFM; 2 Cie/ 13 BG; 2 Cie/ 13 BM; 3e Esc/ GERB (sqn from armor repair battalion).

Sous-groupeements: Farret & Noiret (i.e. under mech inf bn CO & tank regt CO respectively); subsequently, Quillichini; Rouvillois.

Groupeement Tactique L (Col de Langlade)

12 RCA; II/ RMT; 1 Bat/ 40 RANA; 3 Bat/ 22 GC-FTA; 2 Esc/ RMSM; 4 Esc/ RBFM; 1 Cie/ 13 BG; 3 Cie/ 13 BM; 2 Esc/ GERB.

Sous-groupeements Massu & Minjonnet; subsequently, Gribius; Fugier; Faulconnier.

Groupeement Tactique V (Col Billotte; from Sept 1944, Col de Guillebon)

501 RCC; III/ RMT; XI/ 64 RADB; 1 Bat/ 22 GC-FTA; 3 Esc/ RMSM; 2 Esc/ RBFM; 3 Cie/ 13 BG; 1 Cie/ 13 BM; 1 Esc/ GERB.

Sous-groupeements Putz & Warabiot; subsequently, La Horie; Canterel; Debray; Delpierre; Barboteaux; Sarazac.

The tank-equipped 1st Sqn of the RMSM also formed the core of a detached Groupeement Tactique R under the Spahis' Col Rémy; this was facilitated by the regiment's large size, further expanded in autumn 1944 to include halftrack infantry with antitank guns.

Throughout, *sous-groupeement* compositions would be tailored



Captain Dronne of 9ème Compagnie, III/ RMT, who led the first column into downtown Paris on the evening of August 24, 1944, is seen here on the following morning giving orders to his small team in the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville (see also Plate D3). Raymond Dronne's personal jeep bore the name *Mort aux Cons*, which could be politely translated as "Death to [all] A**holes." When Dronne was presented to Gen de Gaulle on August 26 the Free French leader noticed the jeep's name, and commented that this was a vastly ambitious goal...

to meet immediate needs, and most commanders changed over time (either due to casualties, or in order to alternate officers between combat and staff appointments).

The 2 DB's three mechanized battalions of Colonial infantry would prove insufficient in practice. Occasionally the division's units would directly accept volunteers from the liberated population and the FFI (French Forces of the Interior – the Resistance) to swell their ranks, but normally recruits first needed months of organization, equipment and training by the rear echelons.

Liberation of Paris

With XV Corps halted south of the Falaise Pocket, Leclerc was eager to press on eastwards towards Paris. General de Gaulle's agenda depended upon the liberation of the capital by his own troops. It was vital for him to impose his authority there, to prevent strong Communist elements of the Resistance from seizing power (he was seriously conscious of the historic example of the 1870–71 Paris Commune.) He was in communication with non-Communist resistants, who warned that a general rising was imminent. The German garrison was neither strong nor fanatical, but the exactly simultaneous fate of Warsaw following the initial success of the Polish Home Army's rising was a chilling warning of what could happen in such circumstances. To the US chain of command – who had no intention of getting bogged down in urban warfare in a major city now that the Germans were on the run – the question of who entered

The M4A2 *Aurstaedt* from the 2ème Peloton, 2ème Escadron/ 501ème RCC photographed on the Quai Saint-Michel along the River Seine, beside the cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris. This touristic-looking picture can be dated to the afternoon of August 25.



Tramontane, an M10 from the 2ème Peloton, 4ème Escadron/ Régiment Blindé de Fusiliers-Marins seen on August 25 engaging a local German strongpoint in the western suburbs of Paris (Boulogne – Avenue Morizet). The comparatively quick surrender of Gen von Choltiz at about 1330hrs naturally generated confusion among the dispersed defenders, and some strongpoints did not surrender until they were reached in the late afternoon and early evening by cease-fire teams including German officers with white flags. Many of the garrison were intent on surrendering to regular troops rather than *résistants*.



Paris, August 25, 1944: Place de l'Etoile (today, Place de Charles de Gaulle) at around 1500hrs. The M10 *Siroco* (3ème Peloton, 4/ RBFM) and the Sherman M4A2 *Tardenois* (2ème Peloton, 3/ 12 RCA) from GT Langlade engaging targets along the main avenues that meet up at the Arc de Triomphe. *Tardenois* would be destroyed in Alsace on November 28; *Siroco* would finish the war with the impressive score of nine destroyed tanks (see Plate E1). Note that in Paris this M10 still had its "Cullin" hedgerow-cutter fitted.

Paris and exactly when was simply a distraction, and over the period August 15–22 the consequent wrangling strained Franco-US relations badly.

On August 18 the US 7th Armored Div broke through at Chartres, and the next day, as two US divisions reached the River Seine northwest of Paris, the first Resistance uprisings broke out in the capital. Also on August 19, the 2 DB was transferred to US V Corps (Gen Gerow) from First Army, who ordered the deployment of GT Langlade to help the US 90th Infantry's part in closing the Falaise Pocket. De Langlade successfully linked up with Polish 1st Armored Div, but from August 22 the 2 DB was ready to march at short notice. On his own initiative Leclerc had quietly sent a small detachment from GT V under its second-in-command Col de Guillebon to scout the approaches to Versailles southwest of Paris, and this reported that the enemy seemed to be falling back.

Leclerc then went over the heads of both his corps and army commanders, requesting permission from Gen Bradley at 12th Army Group and from Gen Eisenhower himself for 2 DB to advance directly on Paris. This violation of discipline infuriated Gen Gerow, who threatened to cut off the division's fuel supplies. However, the political argument went in De Gaulle's favor, and on the 22nd Gerow was obliged to give Leclerc formal orders to march on Paris in two columns, giving priority to a western approach via Versailles. Gerow would follow the 2 DB with the US 4th Inf Div (on Leclerc's right), V Corps reconnaissance and artillery units, and would ostensibly control the operation.



The approach

The division's staging area was to be around Rambouillet, about 35km (22 miles) southwest of the edge of Paris, which meant a tiring approach march of up to 200km (125 miles) for some 2 DB units on August 23. The final advance from Rambouillet began at 0630hrs on August 24, in two main columns. From the southwest, GT Langlade (plus a detachment led by the Spahis' Col Rémy) was tasked with moving via Trappes and St-Cyr to Versailles, then by the Sèvres bridge

to the Porte de St-Cloud at approximately “8 o’clock” on the city’s perimeter.² Billotte’s GT V would march east from Rambouillet to Arpajon on Route Nationale 20, then turn north via Longjumeau and Sceaux, to enter by the Porte d’Orléans at “6 o’clock.” The spearheads were supposedly to rendezvous at the central Place de la Concorde. Colonel Dio’s GT D would finally be committed to follow GT V’s southern axis of advance, where the network of suburban minor roads would allow parallel movements by separate sub-groups.



The M10 Corsaire (2ème Peloton. 3/ RBFM) moving cautiously along the Rue de Fleurus towards the Seine on August 25. The accompanying infantry squad provide necessary security for a vehicle with an open turret involved in street fighting. French troops and civilians suffered many losses to German snipers between August 25 and 27, when the central city was regarded as secured, though hard fighting went on in the northeast suburbs until the 29th.

The total Wehrmacht forces in the greater Paris area numbered about 20,000, of whom some 5,000 – based on the rump of the distinctly “second line” 325. Sicherungs-Div – were inside the city itself. Since August 19 these had been intermittently fighting scattered but locally fierce clashes with the lightly-armed Resistance, who had barricaded hundreds of streets. General von Choltitz’s command was of motley composition, including everything from paratroop Flak gunners and well-equipped Military Police to middle-aged office clerks issued with captured weapons; in the city itself they were supported by only about one company of PzKw V Panthers and another of elderly French tanks. The outer defenses were spread through villages and road junctions in an arc from roughly Trappes in the west, through Toussus-le-Noble, Seclay, and Palaiseau to Longjumeau on RN 20,

² See map on p. 69, Osprey Campaign 194, *Liberation of Paris 1944*



This PzKw V Ausf A was destroyed on the afternoon of August 25 in the Place de l’Odéon, close to the Jardins du Luxembourg. The Panther received three 105mm rounds at close range from *La Moskowa*, an M4A3 howitzer tank belonging to the command platoon of 2ème Escadron/ 501ème Régiment de Chars de Combat. While the first two rounds glanced off the glacis, the third penetrated the right side of the hull. The Panther gun’s long range was useless in the narrow streets of Paris, where the lighter Shermans could exploit their better mobility.

August 26: Capt Plantegenet, commander of 1ère Batterie/ 40ème Régiment d'Artillerie Nord Africaine, entering Paris in his jeep. When the Parisians realized that their liberators were French, a mixed feeling of joy and pride quickly took over the whole population, and all restraint was abandoned for a few days. The GIs of the US 4th Inf Div who entered the city from the east on August 25 also benefited from this very special moment.



This M4A2, *Quimper* of 3ème Peloton, 2ème Escadron/ 12ème Régiment de Cuirassiers fell victim to a *Panzerfaust* on the Quai d'Orsay. The penetration can be seen low on the hull, just behind the bottom corner of the forward appliqué armor plate. The crew managed to escape before the ammunition exploded, which blew off the turret; the photo was taken some time afterwards, when the upside-down turret had been lifted back on to the hull. Note the turret rear stowage box, an addition by regimental workshops often seen on the 12ème RC's Shermans.

backed by others at Massy, Wissous and Orly, and finally at Clamart, Sceaux and Croix-de-Berny. They were weak in infantry, but notably strong in the 8.8cm and lighter guns of the Luftwaffe's multi-battalion 1. Flak-Brigade.

On the morning of August 24, enemy resistance on the western route from Rambouillet to Versailles persuaded Leclerc to switch GT L's main axis to their right, on to Route 189 through the Chevreuse valley via Villacoublay, leaving only Rémy to make a demonstration towards St-Cyr and Versailles. During the day De Langlade's sub-groups fought their way through the southwestern "Flak belt" at some cost (particularly at Jouy-en-Josas), but by nightfall they had reached and secured the bridge at Sèvres.

Billotte's advance north from Arpajon made rapid progress; GT V captured the bridge at Longjumeau by 1000hrs, and then split into Sub-Groups Putz and Warabiot. In articulation, these fought through stiff resistance at Massy and Wissous, and then around Fresnes prison. By nightfall they were able to bivouac around the crossroads at Croix-de-Berny.



Penetration and assault

Both inspired and hampered by the joyful civilians who swarmed into the streets to greet them, the troops were tired after 48 hours on the march and in combat. But Leclerc was under heavy pressure from Gen Gerow, who had expected him to enter Paris on the 24th, and was himself impatient. At Croix-de-Berny, Leclerc encountered Capt Raymond Dronne, a Colonial veteran who

had followed him since Gabon, and who now commanded the largely Spanish 9th Co of III/ RMT. Telling him that intelligence reported no Germans in the area east of Fresnes, the general ordered Dronne to take an *ad hoc* battlegroup and penetrate the center of Paris that night, come what may. With some 150 men of a tank platoon, two halftrack infantry platoons and one of engineers, Dronne successfully carried out this mission (see under Plate D). At around 2045hrs on the light summer evening he entered by the Porte d'Italie, and – guided through ecstatic crowds by a youth on a moped – he managed to reach the Hôtel de Ville at 2122 hours. He reported the imminent arrival of 2 DB to the Resistance leaders assembled there and at the Police Prefecture, and put his column into all-round defense.

During August 25 most of the 2 DB, and elements of US 4th Inf Div from the east, entered and occupied central Paris. Resistance was in some places determined, but sporadic, as most of the garrison fell back to concentrate around the Kommandantur at the Hôtel Meurisse on the Right Bank, and the Luxembourg Gardens and the Senate House on the Left Bank.³

From the northwest, De Langlade's GT L left the Porte de Sèvres at 0700hrs, and reached the Arc de Triomphe in late morning, looking southeast down the Champs Élysées towards the Place de la Concorde at its far end. From the south, GT Dio began moving north via the Porte d'Orléans.

From the northwest, De Langlade's GT L left the Porte de Sèvres at 0700hrs, and reached the Arc de Triomphe in late morning, looking southeast down the Champs Élysées towards the Place de la Concorde at its far end. From the south, GT Dio began moving north via the Porte d'Orléans.

³ See map on p.80, Osprey Campaign 194, *Liberation of Paris 1944* – but NB in early editions this is mid-dated "August 24" instead of August 25.



This M8 Greyhound armored car of the Régiment de Marche de Spahis Marocains was photographed in front of *La Reine Pédauque*, one of the most famous Parisian restaurants of the time. The commander is using his binoculars, but the crew, wearing the RMSM's distinctive red *calots*, are chatting in a relaxed way with civilians and members of the local Resistance.



Another Spahi M8 seen moving along the Rue de Rivoli, near the Hôtel Meurisse which housed the HQ of Gen Dietrich von Choltitz, commander of the Greater Paris garrison. At about midday on August 25 the 3ème Cie/ 501ème RCC and 3ème Cie, I/ RMT advanced to fight their way along this fashionable street. Ignoring Hitler's order to "Set Paris ablaze!", Von Choltitz signed the first instrument of surrender at about 1330hrs in the Préfecture de Police, and a cease-fire order at Leclerc's HQ in the Gare Montparnasse around 1700hrs.

Lt Oddo (left) and his crew of M3A3 *Madeleine*, of 1er Peloton, 1er Esc/ RMSM, were photographed on the Longchamps racecourse west of Paris, during the short break enjoyed by the division after the city's liberation. During September the M3A3 Stuarts of the 1er Peloton were replaced with 76mm-gun M4A3 Shermans, and soon afterwards M5A1s were issued to replace the M3A3s in the other platoons of the 1st Squadron.



Its SG Noiret made a wide left hook along the Seine, to reach the defended École Militaire via the Eiffel Tower and Champ du Mars; meanwhile its SG Rouvillois punched straight ahead to Les Invalides and the Quai d'Orsay. To their east, Bilotte's GT V also advanced in two columns. From the Porte de Gentilly, the left-hand SG Warabiot would come up against Panzers in the Tuileries Gardens, later capturing Gen von Choltitz and his staff at the Hôtel Meurisse in the early afternoon. From the Porte d'Italie, SG Putz would reach the strongly defended Senate House soon afterwards, finally taking it at about 1800hrs. By that time the lead elements of GTs L and V had already met in the Place de la Concorde. The last German hold-outs in the central city – a few tanks at the Palais de Luxembourg – surrendered at about 1935hrs, although sporadic fighting continued in



The division resumed its eastward movement into Lorraine as the southern spearhead of XV Corps on September 8; here German soldiers surrender to infantry of the Régiment de Marche du Tchad during the fighting for the town of Andelot on September 10–12.

the outskirts. General Leclerc established his HQ at the Gare Montparnasse, where Gen de Gaulle joined him from Rambouillet at about 1615 hours. On the next afternoon, August 26, armored vehicles of the Division Leclerc paraded down the Champs Élysées, leading and following Gen de Gaulle's historic progress on foot from the Arc de Triomphe to Notre Dame cathedral.

While many soldiers inevitably celebrated, and some were even lucky enough to be reunited with their families, fighting continued northeast of the city around St-Denis, Gonesse and Blanc-Mesnil. Sub-Group Noiret from GT Dio, deprived of tank support due to the 12 RC's inability to get their Shermans across the Morée river, suffered significant casualties before taking Le Bourget airport on the 27th. Violent German counterattacks north of Paris continued for another five days. In all, the liberation of the city and its environs cost 2 DB about 628 killed and wounded, plus 11 tanks destroyed and 11 disabled.

Local recruiting of volunteers aged from 18 up started at once among civilians and Resistance fighters; Leclerc judged that about 10 percent of the FFI were first class, perhaps another 25 percent acceptable, and the rest useless. While the division, proven by its first hard weeks of combat, rested and maintained order during the first days of September, Gen Leclerc was at last able to visit his wife and children, whom he had not seen for four years. (His two eldest sons, aged 18 and 17, joined the division, serving in the ranks of II/ RMT and 12 RCA respectively in GT Langlade.)

September: Lorraine

Leclerc's hopes for a quick return to his advance eastward were scotched by the worsening Allied supply situation. He had a lower priority than



On September 12–13, 1944, the division's GT Langlade engaged the newly created 112. Panzer- Brigade around the village of Dompierre. The brigade's main units were 2112 Pz Bn (Panthers), I/Pz Regt 29 (PzKw IVs), 2112 Pz Aufkl Bn, and the two-battalion 2112 Pz Gren Regiment. After 36 hours of hard fighting the German formation was practically wiped out, partly due to the excellent air support provided by the P47 Thunderbolts of the USAAF 406th Fighter Group. This PzKw V Ausf G Panther suffered an internal explosion after being hit during a rocket attack from a P47. It is believed that at Dompierre the Germans lost the greatest number of tanks and other AFVs in the shortest time of all the actions fought on their Western front.

Composition of Groupement Tactique Langlade at Dompierre, September 12–13, 1944

Sous-groupement Massu (Maj Jacques Massu)
2/ 12 RCA; 3rd Ptn, 4/ RBFM; Support Co, 5 & 7 Cos, II/ RMT; 3 Bat/ 40 RANA

Sous-groupement Minjonnet (Maj Pierre Minjonnet)
4/ 12 RCA; 1st Ptn, 4/ RBFM; 6 Co, II/ RMT; 2 Bat/ 40 RANA

Reserve (Col Paul de Langlade)
Services Sqdn, 1 & 3/ 12 RCA; 2nd Ptn, 4/RBFM; 2/ RMSM; 1 Bat / 40 RANA; FFI "Co de Vaugirard"
(Frédéric Blais, *Militaria* No. 323, June 2012, p.47)

Maréchal des Logis-Chef (Sgt-Maj) Jemy was the commander of M4A2 Sherman turret number 24, named *Cevennes*, of 1er Peloton, 2ème Escadron/ 12ème Régiment de Chasseurs d'Afrique. He was killed in action on October 25, 1944, near the village of Glonville in Lorraine. Note that he is still wearing the old M1935 French mechanized troops helmet, as often seen in the division's tank regiments (see Plate E2a).



American divisions for replacements for disabled tanks and other vehicles, as well as fuel and ammunition. General Gerow was never going to be an understanding commander, and Leclerc managed to engineer the division's

E

LORRAINE, SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 1944

(1) M10 tank destroyer *Siroco*, 3ème Peloton, 4ème Escadron/ Régiment Blindé de Fusiliers-Marins; October 11, 1944

By the time of a photographed parade on October 11, QM Krockenberger's crew of 420154 had been visibly credited with the destruction of nine German AFVs. The most recent were three Panthers knocked out in a matter of moments at Dompaigne cemetery on the evening of September 13, when this TD was serving with GT L's Sub-Group Massu. Krockenberger and his gunner Le Callonec had a hair's-breadth escape when a shell fired in reply passed between them and ricocheted off the turret rear counterweight. Note both the gun rings, and the tiny white tank silhouettes painted along the bottom edge of the hull. The other markings are mostly conventional, though the "S" of *Siroco* has a snaky shape.

(1a) When the sailors were not in action – like this loader re-ammunitioning with a 3in shell – they proudly replaced the US tanker's helmet with their *bachi* cap. Many photos show RBFM personnel wearing the US M1942 mackinaw jacket over the field jacket, wool uniform, and/or HBT overalls.

(1b) *Siroco*'s tactical sign is unusually comprehensive. Above the RBFM's "Y" is a bar with four "ticks" for 4th Sqn, and the whole is surrounded by three square dots signifying 3rd Platoon of that squadron. (Frédéric Blais, *Militaria* No. 325, August 2012; Eric Brunet, *Militaria* No. 381, June 2017)

(2) M4A3 Sherman *Champagne*, 3ème Peloton, 3ème Escadron/ 12ème Régiment de Chasseurs d'Afrique; September 12, 1944

This 76mm-gun Sherman with the T23 turret was the 3rd Platoon commander's tank in Capt de Bort's 3rd Squadron.

During the summer the tank regiments had begun to receive both M4A1 and M4A3 76mm Shermans, which were at first shared out sparingly among platoons, and also 75mm M4A1s and M4A3s from US Army stocks. Ordered by a staff officer to advance from a perfect hull-down position, *Champagne* was the only Sherman lost on September 13 at Ville-sur-Ilion near Dompaigne, while fighting with the beleaguered reserve element of GT Langlade. A photo taken the day before the battle shows streaks of dried mud on the hull side, which have been omitted so as not to obscure the markings. Turret number 55 was left on the battlefield as a memorial; its markings are commemorated on a preserved M4A3, but research is confused by there having been a later replacement with the same name. The preserved tank is numbered 420051, but photos of the original *Champagne* show no *immatriculation*, and the US Army serial USA 3099828 S still being displayed. Note that a German helmet is placed on the nearside headlight cage on the glacis. The crew were *Aspirants* (probationary 2nd Lts) Nouveau and Guichard (commander and temporary replacement), and Chasseurs Hainselin (gunner), Lartigue (loader/operator), Antoine (driver) and Morel (co-driver); with great good luck, all escaped without injury when their tank was "brewed up" by two AP hits.

(2a) Photos of both commanders show the continued use of the M1935 French Army mechanized troops' helmet, here with a silver rank stripe on the front pad. This is repeated on the heavy jacket, which appears to be a variant of the Canadian-made mackinaw; the standard issue had a white shearling collar.

(2b) Tac sign of *Champagne*. Here, the "C" and two flanking vertical bars identify the regiment, and the three sideways "ticks" at their ends the squadron.

1b



1a



1



2a



2b



2





Panther Ausf G turret number 332 was captured intact in the main street of Dompaigne on September 13; here it is being examined by men from I/ 40ème RANA. The Panther, chassis number 120 790, proved to be almost brand new; it had emerged from the MAN factory in Nuremberg at the end of July 1944. For many years it would be displayed outside the Army Museum at Les Invalides, Paris, but in 1975 it was moved to the reserve collection of the Tank Museum at Saumur. In 2007 it was decided to restore it as captured; the task was completed in 2015, and this historic vehicle is now one of the key pieces in the Tank Museum's impressive collection of World War II German armor.

return to Third Army's XV Corps under the friendlier French-speaking Gen Haislip. This also kept the Gaullist Leclerc's division safely under US command, at a time when what was about to become French First Army under Gen de Lattre had landed in the south of France and was now pushing north fast with US Seventh Army.

Fuel shortage in Patton's Third Army was such that Leclerc could not resume the advance with his complete division on September 8, so he ordered De Langlade to lead off, with SGs Massu and Minjonnet following two parallel axes eastwards with Col Rémy's GT R; the rest of the division would follow as soon as the supply position allowed. After advancing from Troyes to Chaumont, Leclerc was ordered to make for Épinal and the west bank of the Moselle; XV Corps was on the right flank of Patton's army, and 2 DB was its southernmost formation. The division eventually crossed the Meuse river at Neufchâteau and Bourmont, moving on axes south of the US 79th Infantry Division. Patrols of Rémy's Spahis met up with elements of the Gaullist 1 DMI from the French First Army on September 11 at Montbard.

The following day a fuel convoy allowed a resumption of the advance; GT Billotte liberated Andelot, and GT Langlade an internment camp at Vittel. Late in the day, close to the twin villages of Dompaigne and Lamerey in the valley of the little Guitte river, Langlade ran straight into Oberst von Usedom's 112. Panzer-Brigade, sent by Gen von Manteuffel's Fifth Panzer Army to interfere with the imminent meeting of US Third Army from the east with French First Army from the south. The M10s of 4/ RBFM exchanged fire with PzKw V Panthers on higher ground beyond the Guitte, both sides taking losses before nightfall ended the duel. The Germans moved down into the villages; GTs Dio and Billotte had to maintain the link with the US 79th Inf Div to the north, but Langlade's sub-groups under Massu and Minjonnet took up positions north-west of Dompaigne and to its south, respectively. The crews of 40 Shermans and seven M10s spent the hours of darkness refueling and rearming.

Dompaire

The fighting resumed in the drizzly dawn of the 13th, when a Panther squadron advancing south from the village was successfully halted by M10s. The fresh German brigade was equipped with 59 Panthers and 45 PzKw IVs plus a Panzergrenadier regiment, but it was a “green” formation with inadequately trained crews. Leclerc also had – importantly – US and British air support on call, and received telephoned information about German movements from the civilian population. The infantry-fighting for the village was costly for II/ RMT, and a surprise thrust southwards by the PzKw IV battalion at GT L’s headquarters at Ville-sur-Ilion nearly succeeded before being checked. However, the Panzers were handled with little skill, and among the hamlets and woods they were outmaneuvered and outfought by Massu’s and Minjonnet’s Navy tank destroyer and Army tank crews (who included some with new 76mm gun Shermans). While Billotte’s GT from the north was moved down to cover De Langlade’s left, the Germans’ attempts to get around his right were stopped dead, not least by four separate waves of fighter-bombers during the day. On September 14 the enemy abandoned the field; their losses seem to have been 35 Panthers and 13 PzKw IVs plus some 35 other vehicles, and 112. PzBde was disbanded ten days later. The armor losses of 2 DB on September 12–14 were six Shermans and M10s, with 44 men killed. Both Gens Haislip and Patton were delighted by this Free French success, which seems to have achieved the fastest destruction of any Panzer unit in the West.

A few days after the battle of Dompaire, Col Billotte, never the easiest of subordinates, left the 2 DB to take command of the new French 10th Infantry Division. Command of his tactical group passed to the loyal gunner Col de Guillebon, who had served Leclerc since 1940, latterly as divisional chief of staff and most recently as Billotte’s second in command.

Passing through Langlade’s positions, GT Dio and Col Rémy’s lighter reconnaissance force crossed the Moselle and reached the Mortagne river on September 21. On the night of October 1/2 men of GT Guillebon’s



The tac sign on the rear door of this halftrack clearly identifies it as a vehicle from a headquarters element of the artillery battalion I/ 40ème RANA. It was photographed in the Mondon Forest on October 30, 1944, during the surprise maneuver that led to the seizure of Baccarat. Due to the Herculean efforts of the 13ème Régiment du Génie, small forest tracks had been improved to support tank movements.

In the streets of captured Baccarat, November 1, 1944: the crew of this M20 armored reconnaissance car are wearing French Navy headgear with their mackinaws and tanker jacket, identifying them as members of the Régiment Blindé de Fusiliers-Marins. In the RBFM an M20 was included in the command element of each tank-destroyer platoon. Note the tire chains, a reminder of the deteriorating roads this late in the year.



Sub-Group Putz ran into a German counterattack in the heavily-wooded Rambervillers–Anglemont area; this was one of several small actions that cost significant casualties, to the Spahis among others. The XV Corps advance was now running out of steam; at the end of lengthening supply lines, fuel was being stockpiled while Patton's Third Army prepared to lend Haislip's XV Corps to Gen Patch's Seventh Army, from Gen Devers' US 6th Army Group to the south (which also included Gen de Lattre's French First Army.) Leclerc used the time to concentrate his division and to carry out vehicle maintenance after a month of steady advances.

For most of October 1944 the 2 DB held static positions, consolidating its supplies and taking in replacements for its casualties. The Régiment de Marche du Tchad, always starved of infantry replacements, also took under command several companies of local *résistants*; valuable for their local knowledge and their intelligence-gathering about German positions, they were given makeshift uniforms to regularize their status if captured. While waging a lively campaign of patrolling, Leclerc used the time to plan and prepare his next move. His objective would be the town of Baccarat, an important crossroads just beyond the Mortagne that was essential to the advance through Lorraine, and which was held by elements of 21. Panzer-Division.

Under heavy autumn rains the sticky mud limited vehicle movements. The division needed the heavily wooded Forêt de Mondon as an assembly area, so trees were felled and an extemporized gravel road was built using the rubble of two villages destroyed in the recent fighting. Since the division's 13ème Bataillon du Génie was too small to accomplish such a task alone, Leclerc borrowed American dump trucks and drivers; remarkably, the engineering operations were completed without the Germans deducing Leclerc's intentions. He was careful to ensure that the bridges over the Mortagne river remained intact.

The main German defenses faced south of Baccarat, and Leclerc judged that he could take the town from the north by outflanking the German

positions in a three-pronged attack. One axis would cut through the village of Hablainville, a second from the direction of Ogéville, and the third would advance directly at Baccarat itself. Impressed by the division's performance at Dompierre, Gen Patton had promised Leclerc heavy artillery support from neighboring US formations.

October: Baccarat

At dawn on October 31 the 2 DB advanced from its hidden assembly areas, covered by a hurricane of artillery fire that pinned the defenders in their trenches. Apart from the US corps artillery, the war diary of 1/3 RAC recorded that it alone fired more than 2,400 rounds that day, so averaging 88 rounds per howitzer. The Germans opened fire on the advancing Sub-Groups Massu, La Horie and Quilichini, but Allied artillery fire hit them just as the tanks of Sub-Group Rouvillois burst from the woods north of the town, far too late for the defenders to switch targets. The timing of the operation and the interaction of the different *sous-groupements* was so seamless that the assault on Baccarat was compared by commentators to an intricate and perfectly performed ballet, and Leclerc would acknowledge it as one of 2 DB's finest successes.

After the liberation of Baccarat, XV Corps' US 44th and 79th Inf Divs advanced on the Germans' so-called *Vor Vogesen Stellung*, a defensive line stretching south from Réchicourt-le-Château to Badonviller and Senones in the western foothills of the Vosges massif. While 2 DB did not immediately follow, elements of its GT Dio maintained contact with 44th Inf Div as it moved through the wooded Parroy area. Leclerc was fixated on Strasbourg, the objective to which his men had pledged themselves at Koufra Oasis in

Navy Lt Philippe de Gaulle (center), son of the general, was deputy commander of the RBFM's 1st Squadron. He is seen here among his men in the village of Lafrimbolle, early in the Vosges crossing operation. Peaked (visored) caps were worn by ranks from *second maitre* upwards, i.e. senior petty officers and officers.





The recovery of this M4A2 from 501 RCC took place some time after the outflanking of the German defenses which led to the seizure of Saverne on November 22. Considering the weather conditions and the nature of the "going," it is hardly surprising that some tanks ended up stuck in ditches. Despite some pockets of resistance, the retreating German troops were swept aside in the rush of Leclerc's surprise advance, which netted some 12,500 prisoners in five days.

1941. The divisional commander was already planning an advance on the city with his head of intelligence, LtCol Repiton-Préneuf.

November: the Vosges

On November 10, Gen Haislip briefed Leclerc on his next major operation: to support XV Corps' US 44th and 79th Inf Divs in their advance towards Saverne, a key town which was roughly 70km (44 miles) north and east of Baccarat along the curving Route Nationale 4. The 2 DB was expected to exploit the anticipated breakthrough by those divisions into the Vosges hills, to seize the Saverne gap in the eastern edge of the hills and hold it against an anticipated counterattack from the north. General Haislip left Leclerc to plan his division's dispositions, and on November 12 Leclerc assigned GT D to support the 44th Div and GT L to the 79th, with whose commanders Cols Dio and De Langlade liaised. Following the US divisions, they would advance on two axes, and whichever proved easiest to exploit would be reinforced with as large a force as possible from GT Guillebon and Rémy's light GT R. The objective was the plain and the minor river crossings west of the Rhine around Strasbourg. The XV Corps commander knew of Leclerc's fixation on Strasbourg itself, and was broadly aware of what the French general had in mind.

Leclerc had been studying the Vosges area since the beginning of November, and had sent for 1/10,000 scale maps from Paris to enable a variety of options to be considered. He thought that the American plan was too predictable and would be countered by German dispositions. On November 12 he assembled his staff and GT commanders, and explained

to them his chosen plan for penetrating the wooded hills of the Vosges. He advised his commanders to send multiple columns filtering along the minor roads to dislocate the German defense, rather than marching concentrated formations in slower-moving columns along major routes. From his prewar service in this region Leclerc knew that one key to infiltrating through the Vosges was the Col du Dabo, an eastwards pass through steep hills named for a village situated south of Phalsbourg and some 18km (11 miles) southwest of Saverne. By this route, vehicles could descend directly on to the Alsatian plain no more than 15km from Strasbourg. The plan was unconventional, but it offered the possibility of surprise.

Leclerc's subordinates seldom questioned his operation orders, but this time the assembled staff officers saw many potential problems. Large mechanized units would be moving on crude, minor roads through forested hills, which were vulnerable not only to the winter weather but to blocking positions manned by even small numbers of resolute defenders. Leclerc was adamant, however: "I will not ask you to understand the details of the order, but rather to understand its spirit. It must be obeyed; there will be no further discussion."

The US XV Corps opened its offensive to liberate Alsace on November 13, 1944, and their chosen axis for advance was north, then east, broadly along Route Nationale 4. Events soon showed that Leclerc's misgivings about this approach were justified. Between November 13 and 16 the US divisions fought their way through stubborn German positions, in terrible



The M4A2 *Camargue* of 3rd Ptn, 2nd Sqn/ 12th Chasseurs d'Afrique entering Saverne on November 22. The division crossed the Vosges on minor roads and tracks north and south of the main route of approach, forcing German garrisons facing the US 44th and 79th Inf Divs to surrender when they realized that Allied tanks had got behind them and were advancing from their rear. Note the German spelling "*Tabak*" on the café/tobacconist – since 1940 the Germans had once more treated Alsace as part of their Reich.

This Piper Cub light observation aircraft (see Plate F1) served the spotters of I/ 3ème Régiment d'Artillerie Coloniale to correct artillery fire. The divisional artillery's six Pipers were also used for liaison by Gen Leclerc and his senior officers, and carried out other special missions. This aircraft, No.72-G, is the one sent by Leclerc to deliver a message of hope to the Paris insurgents a couple of days before the drive on Paris was authorized. Skimming the rooftops, the pilot managed to drop a message inside the Préfecture de Police.



weather that denied them all but minimal air support. On November 14 the 79th Inf Div ran into stiffening German resistance at Mignéville, only 15km north of Baccarat.

On the 16th, the impatient Leclerc detailed De Langlade to send a Spahis light armor detachment under Maj Morel-Deville, reinforced by M10s of the RBFM, skirting northeastwards around the battle in the direction of the village of Cirey-sur-Vezouze. The following day he ordered a surprise attack on the little town of Badonviller, southeast of Mignéville, by a second detachment from SG Warabiot under command of LtCol de La Horie,

F

DIVISIONAL ARTILLERY

By their embarkation for Normandy the divisional artillery, commanded by Col Crépin, had three *groupes* (battalions) of field artillery: I Groupe/ 3ème Régiment d'Artillerie Coloniale (I/ 3 RAC), formed around the batteries which had fought with Leclerc since Cameroun and Tchad; I Groupe/ 40ème Régiment d'Artillerie Nord-Africain (I/ 40 RANA); and XI Groupe/ 64ème Régiment d'Artillerie de Division Blindée (XI/ 64 RADB). Each battalion had an HQ battery with command, recon and survey, observation, radio, fire-direction, and AT sections (the latter with three halftrack-drawn 57mm guns). Each normally had three *batteries de tir*, each with nine M7 105mm self-propelled howitzers when at full strength, in addition to command, radio, reconnaissance and supply vehicles. At other times six-gun batteries were deployed in only two fire teams.

(1) Piper L4 Cub, 32ème Section d'Aviation, I/ 3ème Régiment d'Artillerie Coloniale; Lorraine, September 1944

Each artillery battalion had two Piper Cub spotter aircraft; these slow, flimsy machines served throughout the NW Europe campaign, often in bad weather and under fire. This example, numbered 72-G and named on the cowlings *Jean-Pierre*, had to make a number of forced landings with an injured pilot or observer. The initially applied black-and-white "invasion stripes" had been removed by this date; note that USAAF national markings were displayed.

(1a) Sous-lieutenant, Armée de l'Air

The pilots were provided by the 32ème, 27ème and 31ème Sections d'Aviation for the 3ème RAC, 64ème RADB and 40ème RANA, respectively. A photo shows a Piper Cub pilot wearing the Air Force officer's and warrant officer's M1934/35 visored service cap in *bleu Louise* with Free French badge incorporating the Cross of Lorraine, and a US field jacket over olive drab overalls.

(2) M7 105mm howitzer, 32ème Batterie, XI/ 64 RADB; England, July 1944

The self-propelled howitzer *Franche-Comte* (there was no acute accent in the painted name) bears typical markings, including the tactical sign of XI/ 64 RADB with a central "tick" on the upper bar identifying the *groupe's* second battery; in this unit only, the batteries were numbered 31st, 32nd and 33rd. Either a whole artillery battalion or part of it might be provided for one of the *groupements tactiques*, where its 9-gun batteries or 3-gun *sections de tir* might be dispersed to support *sous-groupements*.

(2a) Canonier, XI/ 64 RADB

Photos show the M1 helmet and basic US clothing and web gear. This gunner displays the division's pin-on badge above that of the unit (see Plate H8); some personnel chose to add the red and blue prewar tunic collar patch to the left sleeve



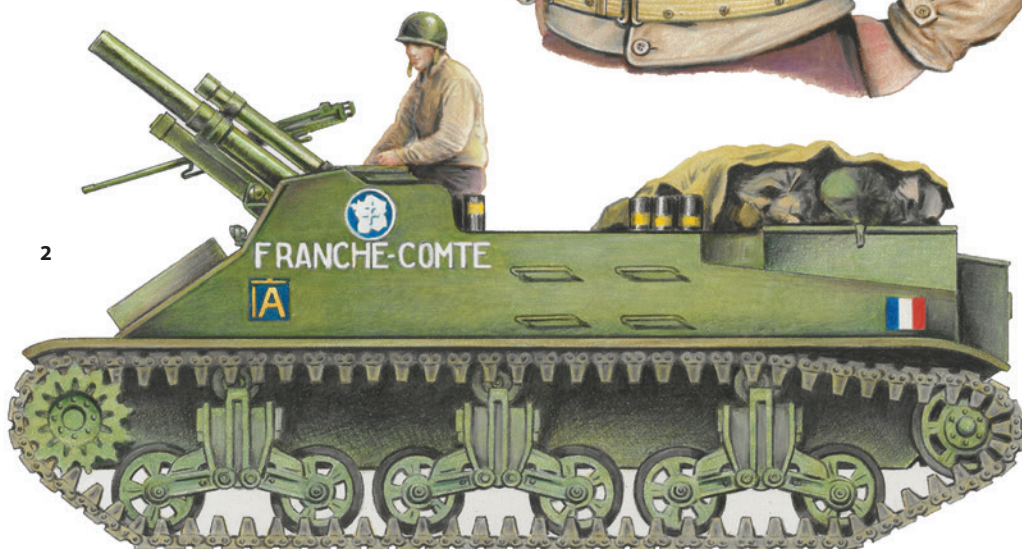
1



1a



2a



2

which was then to turn north to link up with Morel-Deville. At Bréménil on November 18 LtCol de La Horie was mortally wounded, but the combined force managed to seize bridges over the Vezouze river intact. To the west, the US 79th Inf Div captured another crossing over the Vezouze at Blâmont on RN 4; the *Vor Vogesen Stellung* was now outflanked, and the exploitation phase could begin.

The 2 DB took a brief pause to regroup before advancing again on November 19. The GT Dio made slow progress from the area around Blâmont, while De Langlade's GT L advanced from Cirey on two axes, with SG Minjonnet heading for Bertrambois, and SG Massu south of them driving towards Lafrimbolle. Advancing on very narrow fronts through the steep, wooded hills, they encountered German mountain troops, and paid in time and blood to defeat roadblocks, pillboxes and antitank guns; but Leclerc pushed his columns on, sensing success within his grasp. Massu's sub-group from GT L managed to force their way through the Col du Dabo, followed by GT Guillebon. On November 21, north of where 44th Inf Div's advance had stalled outside Phalsbourg, the 12 RC Shermans of GT Dio's SG Rouvillois took a second pass, the Col de La Petite Pierre, while its SG Quillichini (commanded by the battalion CO of I/ RMT) made a feint against Phalsbourg. The division's Alsatian recruits could translate German radio traffic, and the columns were fed up-to-date intelligence by *résistants* who controlled the still-functioning local telephone network. Eventually the columns reached unprepared and weakly manned enemy positions and unmined roads, and the only help Leclerc requested from the American infantry was to gather up the prisoners he left in his wake.

On November 22, under driving rain, SG Massu from GT Langlade descended on to the Alsatian plain near Marmoutier. Swinging up northwards, they linked with SG Rouvillois, and advanced together on Saverne from the southeast. Meanwhile, SG Minjonnet reached the main road between Phalsbourg and Saverne and turned east towards the latter. Saverne fell, and soon afterwards so did Phalsbourg, caught between Quillichini and the tanks of SG Minjonnet returning westwards.

Strasbourg

To the surprise of some in the American chain of command, and the irritation of Seventh Army's Gen Patch, at 0730hrs on November 22 Gen Haislip had authorized Leclerc to drive on Strasbourg, and he unleashed his columns early the following morning.

The longest distance, from Saverne to Strasbourg, was about 35km (22 miles), but Leclerc's units were dispersed; following his typical tactics, he threw them forward along five separate axes. While Quillichini screened them from the north and Morel-Deville from the south, and with Minjonnet held in reserve, the approach roads were allocated to SGs Rouvillois, Massu (both now under GT Langlade), Cantarel, Putz and Debray (GT Guillebon). General Leclerc ordered maximum speed and the bypassing of all centers of resistance so as to achieve surprise. However, progress was slowed both by off-road terrain turned into a morass by heavy rain, and by stubborn resistance, especially on De Guillebon's routes south of the city. The northernmost axis, assigned to Rouvillois with the Shermans of 12 RC, proved the least heavily defended. They pushed into Strasbourg at 1000hrs on November 23, taking the garrison completely by surprise, and the rest of GT Langlade switched routes to follow them in by mid-afternoon.

The German commander, Gen Vaterodt, holed up in Fort Ney with 1,000 men and refused to capitulate (here, as elsewhere, Wehrmacht commanders who had no intention of fighting to the death felt they had to make a decent show of resistance before surrendering). The 2 DB were unable to capture the partly-blown Pont de Kehl over the Rhine, where 12 RCA and II/ RMT suffered significant casualties. German artillery kept firing from the eastern bank until late on November 24, and at midday Leclerc and his staff had a very close shave in divisional HQ, but late that afternoon a salvo of 155mm shells persuaded Gen Vaterodt to surrender Fort Ney. The *Serment de Kouffra* was finally kept, after three years and eight months: in triumph, Leclerc's men hoisted a huge tricolor from the bell tower of Strasbourg cathedral.

The 2 DB was awarded a US Presidential Unit Citation for this victory. In five days the Division Leclerc had crossed the Vosges and liberated Strasbourg, in the process killing more than 2,000 Germans and capturing more than 12,500; they had destroyed or taken 39 Panzers, eight SP guns, 800 halftracks, and more than 150 guns. The campaign is taught to this day at French military academies as a model offensive operation. That Strasbourg remained within range of German artillery on the east bank for some time thereafter did not diminish Leclerc's achievement. The Alsatian capital had been liberated due to his skill and single-mindedness, and to the loyal support of his corps commander Wade Haislip.

While sometimes short of infantry, the Régiment de Marche du Tchad was rich in antitank guns – every halftrack platoon had one 57mm US M1 gun, derived directly from the British QF 6-pounder. While nearly useless against the frontal armor of Panthers and Tigers, it was effective from the side at shorter ranges; it was also a match for the still-common PzKw IV, and lethal against the lighter AFVs that the division often encountered. This gun is photographed beside a farmhouse in the Alsatian village of Krautgersheim in January 1945. The halftrack is *Poto Poto* of 2ème Section, 10ème Cie, III/ RMT; note the ground tripod for the M2 Browning 12.7mm (.50cal) MG stowed on the hull side.





The Colmar Pocket: photographed in February 1945 during the liberation of Obernai, this whitewashed M3A3 of 501ème Régiment de Chars de Combat probably belongs to the headquarters platoon. From January to March 1945 Gen Leclerc's 2ème DB was detached from US XV Corps to II Corps of Gen de Lattre de Tassigny's French First Army. The two French generals were temperamentally incompatible, and late in the battle Leclerc engineered a transfer to US XXI Corps under General Milburn.

In the days that followed, Leclerc's division fought numerous small actions for villages and towns to the north and south of Strasbourg, and suffered painful casualties in the process. The small number of infantry serving in the three battalions of its organic Régiment de Marche du Tchad limited the division's effectiveness in quickly clearing the built-up areas where Germans were still holding out. With winter now upon them, at the end of November the 2 DB was ordered to prepare to march south to take up positions to support Gen Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's operations against the Colmar Pocket. General Leclerc went to Paris to argue vigorously against being placed under De Lattre's command, but in early December the 2 DB was formally attached to Gen de Monsabert's II Corps of French First Army. Before they could physically join that command, however, events far to the north would disrupt Allied plans.

December: shock from the Ardennes

On December 16, 1944 the Germans launched their surprise counteroffensive in the Ardennes by Sixth and Fifth Panzer Armies and Seventh Army. Initially this sent US First Army forces reeling back, and seemed to threaten the whole northern front. While Gens Eisenhower and Montgomery regarded a German thrust to the vital port of Antwerp as the worst-case scenario, the principal concern of French commanders was the risk of their being forced to concede recently liberated territory to conform to Allied strategic requirements, with a consequent German reoccupation of Alsace and Lorraine. Pulling his dispersed *sous-groupements* arrayed around Strasbourg into a coherent defensive deployment, Leclerc assembled as much ammunition and fuel as possible while awaiting orders, and in the meantime welcomed De Gaulle as the division's Christmas guest.

1945: THE LAST BATTLES

On the night of December 31/January 1 the German First Army behind the Saar river launched their Operation “North Wind” southwestwards against US Seventh Army; this had little success, but for a while it seemed that Gen Patch might have to shorten his line. Hearing rumors of a planned withdrawal from Alsace, a horrified Leclerc advised De Gaulle that if ordered to do so by the Americans then he would lead his division alone into blocking positions before Strasbourg, where they would fight to the last man. General de Gaulle was reassured personally by Gen Eisenhower that Alsace would not be abandoned, even temporarily. On January 2, 1945 the 2 DB began to hastily withdraw northwestwards to the Bitche-Sarreguemines area to help block a German attempt to retake the northern Vosges. During the GT L’s move into contact with the US 44th Inf Div, on January 5 an entire tank platoon of the 12 RCA from Sub-Group Massu was destroyed at Gros-Réderching by enemy troops in US uniforms, and complete with a Sherman tank, captured in the Battle of the Bulge. Sub-Group Minjonnet held off a simultaneous attack on nearby Achen, but these actions were followed by two weeks of static warfare in arctic conditions.

January–March: the Colmar Pocket

After the situation in the Ardennes had finally been retrieved, on January 18, 1945 the 2 DB moved south to join II Corps of Gen de Lattre’s French First Army, facing the northern half of the Colmar Pocket. This was a semi-circular salient measuring about 65km wide by 50km deep (40 x 30 miles) based on the west bank of the Rhine, supplied via bridges at Chalampé and Neuf-Brisach. Formed during November 1944 after Leclerc and De Lattre had reached the Rhine at Strasbourg to the north and Mulhouse to the south, respectively, it incorporated a number of towns and villages, a stretch of the Ill river and three canals, all of which offered strong defensive positions for the eight-plus divisions of German Nineteenth Army which held it. Franco-US attacks on it in the second half



This M8 from the RMSM was photographed in a typical half-timbered Alsatian village in early March 1945; note the removal of the front mudguards in poor weather conditions, and the bunches of flowers attached by grateful civilians. Passing on the right is a “Truck, bridge pontoon, 6-ton, 6x6, Brockway B666” belonging to the division’s 13ème Régiment du Génie.



At the end of March 1945 the 2ème DB moved to the area of Chateauroux in central France for rest and re-equipment, but early in April a majority of the division's armor and all its artillery were ordered west to help reduce the German-held port of Royan on the Atlantic coast. Here, M7 105mm SP howitzers, Sherman observation tanks and 105mm howitzer tanks of the 40ème Régiment d'Artillerie Nord Africaine are seen on railroad flatcars on their way to Royan. These flatcars are actually American, shipped to France months earlier to help make up the losses of French rolling stock to Allied air strikes and German confiscation.

of December had failed, and during Operation "North Wind" the Germans had made sorties from the north of the enclave.

The change in senior command troubled Gen Leclerc deeply. Ever since Tunisia he had done everything in his power to keep his division apart from the new French Army, condemning its ex-Vichy commanders for their delay in throwing in their lot with De Gaulle, and considering some of them to be cynical careerists rather than true patriots. (Being something of a puritan, and moved by the sufferings he had witnessed during the drive across his ruined country, he also disapproved of officers who indulged themselves with the rewards of senior rank.) Personally he detested De Lattre, who in his turn resented the younger general's meteoric promotion and the unique esteem in which he was held by De Gaulle (De Lattre was 55 years old, and Leclerc still only 42.) While he respected his corps commander Gen de Monsabert, Leclerc repeatedly complained to De Gaulle about having to serve under De Lattre, and his men had a low opinion of most of De Lattre's troops (apart from their fellow "old Gaullists" of the 1st Inf Marching Div, 1 DMI.) French First Army was weak in modern artillery, and generally could not match the generous levels of logistic support to which the 2 DB had become accustomed while under US command. For his part, De Lattre never missed an opportunity to complain jealously about the favoritism shown to the 2 DB, with its fuller scales of equipment (he even resented its higher-quality tobacco rations).

General de Lattre's army began its operations against the Pocket on January 20, with nine French divisions – I Corps in the south, and II Corps, assisted from January 22–23 by the US 3rd and 28th Inf Divs, in the north. The southern thrust soon bogged down, its first advances sealed off by fierce counterattacks in particularly difficult terrain. In the north, 2 DB was at first in reserve behind 3rd US Inf Div and 1 DMI. (Incidentally, it was in the



The division's 13ème Bataillon Médical had 209 vehicles including 58 Dodge WC54 ambulances, 26 halftracks, 78 trucks and 34 jeeps. Seen in spring 1945, this WC54 with a two-woman crew is probably from Capt Ceccaldi's 1ère Compagnie, which included about a platoon of so-called *Rochambelles* – veterans of a volunteer medical aid organization founded in France in 1940 by an American, Florence Conrad, which was later incorporated into the Free French Forces in North Africa. These *ambulancières* have to make do with male-issue US uniform clothing. See also under Plate G1.

Pocket on January 26 that the US Army's most decorated soldier, Lt Audie Murphy of the 3rd Div's B Co, 15th Infantry, earned his Medal of Honor near Riedwihr.) Leclerc's 501 RCC tanks and III/ RMT infantry from GT Guillebon were committed from January 23. On the 28th, in support of the *légionnaires* of French 5th Armd Div's III/ RMLE, they took heavy losses while capturing Grussenheim (including the legendary LtCol Joseph Putz, the International Brigades veteran of the Spanish Civil War who led a sub-group of GT Guillebon.) On the same day two more American divisions (75th Inf and 12th Armd) were sent in to reinforce De Lattre, the four then forming US XXI Corps under Gen Milburn. In bitter fighting, snowbound Colmar city was cleared on February 2–3. On the 3rd, the 2 DB was transferred from French II Corps to US XXI Corps. Leclerc's GT Langlade then pushed south up the west bank of the Rhine; its SG Gribius linked up with French 1st Armd Div at Fessenheim on February 8, and the following day the Pocket was finally eliminated.

General Leclerc thought that De Lattre's tactics were unimaginative, prolonging the battle and costing needless casualties, but he was hardly an unbiased judge. The destruction of the Colmar Pocket ended the three months of fighting in Alsace, which was the Leclerc Division's costliest

Germany, late April 1945: a halftrack of the Régiment de Marche du Tchad – well supplied with American ration boxes – pauses to refuel during the division's dash into Bavaria under Gen Patch's US Seventh Army. Note that all personnel wear their steel helmets; this final advance was occasionally resisted by diehard SS troops.



campaign, particularly in experienced officers. The 2 DB had to be rested and brought back up to strength, and it was ordered out of the line on March 27.

April: Royan

The town of Royan, guarding the Gironde estuary on France's Atlantic Coast, was one of the strongly fortified ports whose German garrisons had been bypassed and left under the watch of Gen de Larminat's *Armée de l'Ouest* – low-quality and poorly equipped formations mostly formed around *ex-maquisards* of the FFI. Since the previous November, Royan's reduction by the 2 DB with Allied air support had been under intermittent discussion, but more urgent events on the frontier with Germany had naturally led to repeated postponements. After air raids in January the 5,000-strong German garrison, commanded by Adm Michaelis, had allowed most of the civil population to leave Royan rather than continuing to share dwindling food stocks with them.

De Gaulle had intended to make a newly promoted LtGen Leclerc a corps commander, and Leclerc recognized that Cols Dio, de Langlade and de Guillebon were all overdue for promotion to their own divisional commands. However, the organization of a new corps around the nucleus of the tired 2 DB would take time, thus risking the division's cherished hope of taking part in the final invasion of Germany.

In the event, after barely a week out of the line (and with the Allies now across the Rhine), Leclerc was furious to receive orders to send most of his

G

PARIS & LORRAINE, 1944

(1) Dodge WC54 ambulance *Le Vesinet*, 1ère Compagnie/ 13ème Bataillon Médical; Lorraine, September 1944

This ambulance bears a mix of US and Free French markings, retaining the original red crosses and "Ambulance" above the windscreen, 4-ton bridging-class disc, large red-on-white crosses on the sides and rear doors, and the US Medical Corps' red-on-white caduceus sign behind the cab doors – though this has been lifted to make space for 13 BM's bar-above-"S" tac sign. The latter is repeated on a plate on the radiator, above the tricolor and French vehicle number on the fender. The tricolor and division sign are painted on both doors. The female crew of 410162 have added the name *Le Vesinet* above the radiator, recalling their home in the western suburbs of Paris.

(1a) Ambulancière, 1ère Compagnie

Clothing for the battalion was US Army, usually male issue as here, but with a variety of headgear. This ambulance driver wears the sidecap of the French *Service de Santé*, in dark blue with cherry-red top fold and piping. Behind her is a US Army insulated "blood bucket," for transporting about 7gals of bottled blood within an ice-cooled liner. Since 13 BM sub-units were often dispersed between 2 DB's tactical groups (1ère Cie with GTV), personnel often adopted the headgear of a unit with which they served. The 2ème Cie, with GT Dio, incorporated naval *Marinettes* of the Escadron Hors Rang/ RBFM, who wore its "Fusiliers-Marins" sleeve title and crossed-anchors patch along with sailor caps.

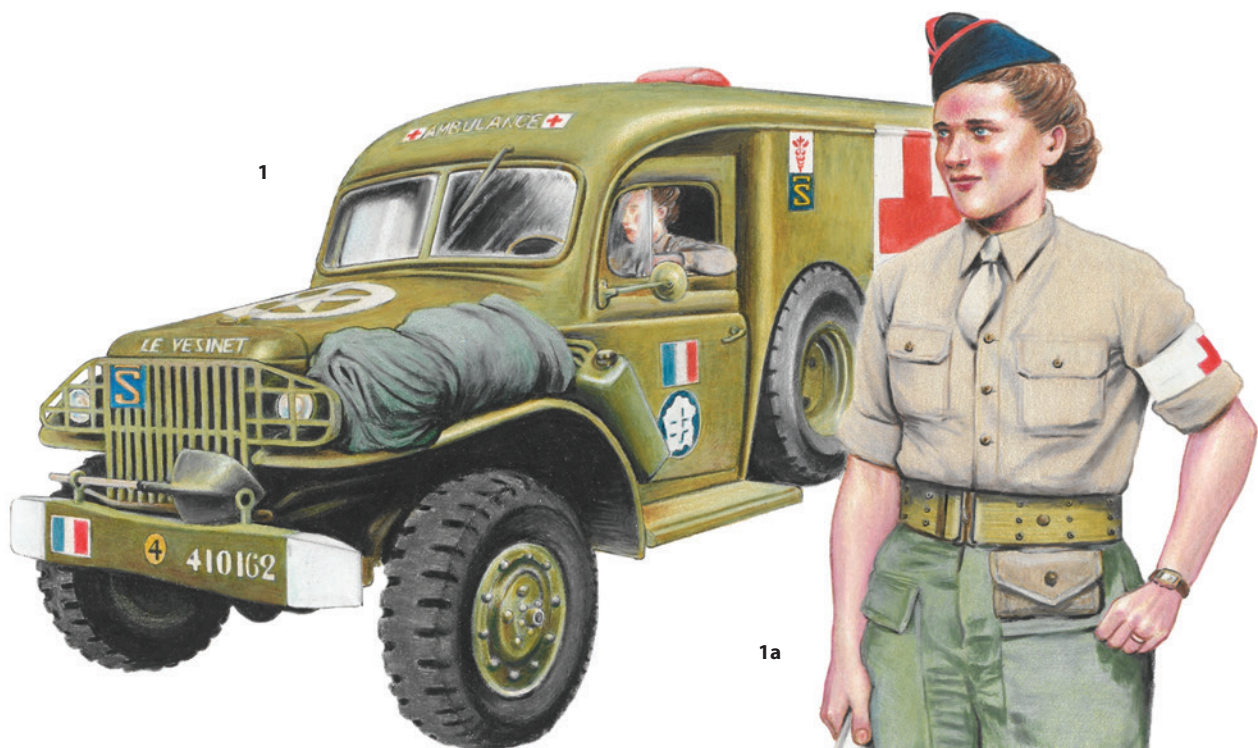
A platoon of male British Quaker volunteers served with 3ème Cie in GT Langlade; conscientious objectors to carrying

arms, these combat medics wore British uniform and insignia plus the 2 DB pin-on badge. Insignia were a long shoulder title "Friends' Ambulance Unit" in blue capitals on khaki, and/ or sometimes a khaki-drill shoulder strap slide with a red cross above black characters "F.A.U." A photo shows one of their ambulances marked similarly to our example, but named *Mickie* in white capitals, and with the three downward "ticks" of 3ème Cie from the top bar of the tac sign painted left-center on the white-tipped front fender immediately before the number 412700. (Jon Mills, *Militaria* No. 304, November 2010)

(2) M3A3 Stuart *Lauraguais*, Section de Protection, Groupement Tactique Langlade; Paris, August 26, 1944

One of four light tanks detached while still in England from 1/ 12 RCA to escort Col de Langlade's group headquarters, 420596/L3/*Lauraguais* was cleaned up for the Liberation parade through Paris. The four Stuarts bore white "L1" to "L4" hull numbers, the *immatriculation* numbers painted below these on the sides, and a circled yellow "L" for Langlade in two positions in place of the usual tactical sign. The bridge disc "13" surmounted a tricolor on the glacis, and the Allied white circled star for ground-air recognition was marked on the turret roof. The marking on the nearside trackguard is a US Transportation Quartermaster (TQM) code applied for the shipment across the Channel; sub-units bore various colored stripes on a white panel. They were normally painted over once in France, but photos show them retained in a few cases.

(2a) The Protection Platoon's TQM marking, with medium green/maroon/medium green stripes.



1a



2a



2





Germany, May 2, 1945: personnel from the divisional headquarters pose by a road sign indicating that Hitler's Berchtesgaden is only 24.5km (15 miles) ahead. Even the German prisoners – presumably taken along as interpreters – share the obvious relief that the war is nearly over. Though US troops were the first to enter Berchtesgaden town two days later, men from the 64ème Regiment d'Artillerie de Division Blindée were actually the first to reach the *Berghof*, Hitler's residence. See also this book's front cover photograph.

division to help break into the defenses of far-away Royan – a militarily pointless operation, given the certainty of eventual German surrender, but one that De Gaulle owed to the loyal General de Larminat. While the remainder of the division recuperated around Chatillon-sur-Indre, a *Groupe de Marche* commanded by Col de Langlade (who had to be recalled from leave, with difficulty), was to be entrained and carried westward across the breadth of France. It would include the 12 RCA, the 12 RC, parts of the RBFM and RMSM, the whole of the division's artillery and some engineers. The US 13th Heavy Artillery Bde would be attached to the French battlegroup, putting a veritable siege train at its disposal, and American naval and air support was also promised. Colonel de Langlade reported to Gen de Larminat on April 8, all too aware that Gen Leclerc was desperate to get his command back in the east as soon as possible.

The plan was for De Larminat's forces to attack the Royan perimeter in northern and southern pincers. The tanks of GT Dio's 12 RC and the tank destroyers of 3/ RBFM formed a sub-group under LtCol Rouvillois with the northern force, together with most of the divisional artillery. The southern force would be spearheaded by GT Langlade's SG Fugier with most of the 12 RCA, while SG Faulconnier comprised 4/ RBFM and the M7 howitzers of XI/ 64 RADB. Following an air raid by USAAF Flying Fortresses which damaged some of the concrete defenses, on April 14 the two columns advanced into the German perimeter. General de Larminat's infantry were held up by minefields, machine-gun nests and street-fighting, and the town was not finally taken until the morning of April 17. This sideshow cost the 2 DB casualties comparable to those it had suffered during the liberation of Paris.

April–May: into Bavaria

Once back in Paris, Leclerc persuaded Eisenhower's chief of staff, Gen Bedell-Smith, to assign the division to US Seventh Army for the drive into southern Germany. The armor went by train, but the wheeled vehicles had to drive all the way back across France, crossing the Rhine at Mannheim. Every member of the division from Gen Leclerc downwards was by now tired out, but they were determined to carry the Cross of Lorraine into defeated Germany. The division was allocated to US XXI Corps under Gen Milburn, with whom Leclerc got on well.

The whole of GT Guillebon and the infantry had preceded them, but the division began to concentrate again at Hall on April 28. Nevertheless, on May 1 the 2 DB was strung out over about 1,200km (745 miles), all the way from the last tanks still entraining back at St-Jean d'Angély to De Guillebon's advance guard with the US 12th Armd Div at Augsburg. That day Munich surrendered, and 12th Armd Div was assigned to occupy the Bavarian capital. This left Leclerc's division as the only armored formation free to advance further.

The next day one of De Guillebon's units drove through Bad Tolz, the location of the Waffen-SS officers' training school. The revenge of seeing Germany utterly prostrate was sweet, but since resistance had virtually ceased Gen Leclerc gave strict orders against needless brutality (an order that must have been doubly necessary after officers from GT Langlade visited Dachau concentration camp.)

On May 4, Gen Patch ordered the 2 DB and US 3rd Inf Div to advance to Salzburg and Berchtesgaden, site of Hitler's personal mountain retreat. Colonel de Guillebon split his GT into SGs Delpierre, Barboteaux and Sarazac, moving south-east and south. At the village of Inzell, Sarazac's men were fired on by some SS, whom they quickly outflanked; 2nd Lt Mulsant, wounded in this skirmish, was the division's final casualty of the war. Jostling for bridge access with the 3rd Inf Div, Leclerc and De Guillebon reached Berchtesgaden town at about 1900hrs, to find it occupied by the US 7th Infantry. Captain Touyeras of 64 RADB claimed the honor of being the first to reach the actual "Eagle's Nest" complex, from the western side, but (unsurprisingly) this was disputed by members of both the US 3rd Inf and 101st Airborne Divisions. Three days later the European war came to an end.

AFTERMATH & CONCLUSION

Farewells

On May 7, 1945 the 2 DB began pulling out of Berchtesgaden. On May 19, more than a thousand of its vehicles paraded before Gens de Gaulle and Leclerc at Kloster-Lechfeld airfield. Although he now wore general's stars and would shortly depart to take command of the 3ème Division Blindée, Paul de Langlade led the drive-past in his Sherman *Auvergne*. On May 23 the division began returning to France, where Leclerc led his men down the Champs Élysées in the Paris victory parade on June 18. On June 22 the 2 DB held its own private parade at Fontainebleau to say a final farewell to Gen Leclerc, who passed the command to Gen Louis Dio. The 2ème Division Blindée would finally be stood down on March 31, 1946.

Indochina

General de Gaulle was determined that France should be represented among the Allies fighting Japan, so French troops must take part in the

liberation of the occupied colony of French Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos). With British cooperation, a small *Corps Léger d'Intervention* was under preparation in Ceylon, and Leclerc was named to command it; but he was still at his headquarters in Paris when the atomic bombs were dropped on August 6 and 9. As France's military representative, Leclerc flew out to the Far East on August 18, and on September 2 he took part in the Japanese surrender ceremony in Tokyo Bay. That same day in Hanoi, the capital of North Vietnam (Tonkin), Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the well-established Communist Viet Minh movement, declared an independent republic. He would negotiate with the French for many months, delaying their return to Tonkin, but his power did not yet extend to the anarchic South (Cochinchina). There, another Communist leader named Tran Van Giau took advantage of the power vacuum to exploit the widespread banditry and sectarian feuding.

The French were quite unable to land major forces to disarm the Japanese and restore order, and the Allies allotted these tasks to the Nationalist Chinese Army in North Vietnam and the British in the South. The Chinese crossed the border on September 9, and Gen Gracey's 20th Indian Div of Fourteenth Army began landing at Saigon on the 12th. At the invitation of the British Adm Mountbatten, Allied C-in-C South-East Asia, the few available French troops landed with them, as the embryo of what was now the French Far East Expeditionary Corps (CEFEO). Leclerc himself landed in Saigon on October 5, soon followed by the first reinforcements. As others arrived over the next six months the British gradually withdrew, thankfully handing over the task of trying to impose order on violent chaos to Gen Leclerc and the political High Commissioner, Admiral d'Argenlieu.

At first Leclerc's experience in South Vietnam encouraged him to believe in straightforward military reoccupation, step by step, and, with some 30,000 troops in-country by February 1946, he achieved a degree of freedom

The veteran M4A2 *Brives la Gaillarde*, from 2ème Peloton, 3ème Escadron/ 12ème Régiment de Cuirassiers (see lower caption on page 27), fronts a line of cleaned-up Shermans in June 1945 at Chatenay-sur-Seine, near Paris. The division took part in the commemorative ceremonies on June 18, the fifth anniversary of Gen de Gaulle's call for resistance on the BBC radio network. General Leclerc passed the command of the division to Gen Dio on June 22.





of movement, if nothing like true pacification. Meanwhile, in the North, the Viet Minh's General Vo Nguyen Giap was already building a formidable military infrastructure.

A *Groupe*ment de Marche de la 2ème Division Blindée, led by LtCol Jacques Massu and popularly known simply as the *Groupe*ment Massu, had been the first French armor to arrive in Indochina, landing in Saigon from October 15, 1945. It comprised 7ème Escadron / 1er Régiment de Marche de Spahis Marocains, with M8 armored cars and later some armored jeeps; 1ère Compagnie/ 501ème Régiment de Chars de Combat (in fact with volunteers from all three of the old division's tank regiments), with three platoons each of six M5A1 Stuart light tanks; an infantry unit (commanded by Maj Dronne) designated IV/ Régiment de Marche du Tchad, with a company's-worth of halftracks and including some volunteers from the Fusiliers-Marins; engineers from the 71ème Bataillon du Génie, and an ambulance element. Deployed for road-opening and in support of infantry during counter-guerrilla operations, it went into action immediately in Operation "Moussac" at My Tho in the Mekong Delta. (The *Groupe*ment Massu would continue to operate in Cochinchina until March 1946, when it was shipped on LSTs up to Haiphong in the Red River Delta of Tonkin. It continued to perform road security operations in Tonkin until November 16, 1946, when it was disbanded at the end of its tour.)

After being appointed to command the French Far East Expeditionary Corps on August 18, 1945, two weeks later LtGen Leclerc signs the Japanese surrender document as the representative of the French Republic aboard the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay on September 2, watched by Gen Douglas MacArthur (left).

After Paris negotiated a return of troops to Tonkin in March 1946, they shared a mutually suspicious coexistence with the Viet Minh while talks with Ho Chi Minh's regime continued. Since their goals were mutually exclusive, however, no compromise could be reached. General Leclerc was recalled to France on July 14, 1946, by which time he had become convinced that the Viet Minh were a wholly new type of enemy with an unbreakable grip on the North Vietnamese population, and thus that no military solution was possible in Tonkin. After a subsequent visit of inspection to prepare a report for the government, he urged negotiations "at any cost." His views and restrained methods were not shared by his successor Gen Valluy; on November 20 outright war broke out in Haiphong, where street-fighting provoked a French naval bombardment and air raids three days later.

Appointed to the post of Inspector of Armed Forces in French North Africa, and at the age of only 45, Gen Philippe Leclerc de Hautcloque was killed when his converted B-25 Mitchell crashed during a sandstorm while flying from Arzew to Colomb-Béchar in Algeria on November 28, 1947. On the fifth anniversary of his death he was posthumously promoted a Marshal of France. He was, and is, remembered by most French men and women as a personification of unselfish and apolitical patriotism. The fact that he was never defeated, and died while his victories were still fresh, meant that after his early death his reputation only grew.

Assessment

Measured against other Allied formations in NW Europe in 1944–45, the combat record of the 2ème Division Blindée equaled that of the best American and British armored divisions. It shone particularly in the caliber of its officers, a number of whom had more extensive command and combat experience than was usual in summer 1944, and also in its effective application of its available weapons and resources, due to habits instilled in the early days of "make do and mend."

Given the conditions they had faced from the Leclerc Column's earliest days in the Libyan desert, their commander expected his officers to show initiative in fulfilling his broad operation orders, making local decisions and taking tactical opportunities as they arose. A natural evolution of the tactics of separated units operating in concert could be traced throughout

H

UNIT BADGES & TACTICAL SIGNS

The division and its units had pin-on metal badges, in white or yellow metal with colored paints or enamels, which were normally displayed on the right or left chest but occasionally on headgear. Those of the 2ème DB's combat and support units are illustrated. For reasons of space the following service units have been omitted: 97ème/84ème Compagnie Mixte de Transmissions (communications); 15ème Groupe d'Escadrons de Réparations (repairs); 97ème Compagnie de Quartier Général (QM); 197ème, 297ème & 397ème Cies de Transport; and 497ème Cie de Services. The uniform insignia and vehicle tactical signs illustrated are as follows, with the abbreviations used in the body text in brackets:

(1) 2ème Division Blindée (2 DB)

(2) (1er) Régiment de Marche de Spahis Marocains – armored reconnaissance (RMSM)

(3) Régiment de Marche du Tchad (I, II & III Bns) – mechanized infantry (RMT)

(4) 501ème Régiment de Chars de Combat – tanks (501 RCC)

(5) 12ème Régiment de Chasseurs d'Afrique – tanks (12 RCA)

(6) 12ème Régiment de Cuirassiers – tanks (12 RC)

(7) I Groupe/ 3ème Régiment d'Artillerie Coloniale (I/ 3 RAC)

(8) XI Groupe/ 64ème Régiment d'Artillerie de Division Blindée (XI/ 64 RADB)

(9) I Groupe/ 40ème Régiment d'Artillerie Nord-Africain (I/ 40 RANA)

(10) Régiment Blindé de Fusiliers-Marins – tank destroyers (RBFM)

(11) 22ème Groupe Colonial, Force Terrestre Antiaérienne – AA (22 GC-FTA)

(12) 13ème Bataillon du Génie – engineers (13 BG)

(13) 13ème Bataillon Médical (13 BM)



2



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the division's combat history. To be effective, this doctrine required not only decisive command and good communications, but also an ethos of "leading from the front." This inevitably led to high officer casualties.

For example, Capt Louis Dio, in command of the heavy group at Koufra in 1941, was badly injured while leading his men against the Italians. At the Forêt d'Écouves in 1944, Col Rémy of the RMSM was wounded and his son Roger died fighting alongside him. Early in Leclerc's daring thrust into the Vosges in November, he lost his St-Cyr classmate and lifelong friend LtCol Jean de La Horie. Another victim of artillery fire, in the Colmar Pocket in early 1945, was LtCol Joseph Putz of III/ RMT; an infantry and tank officer in World War I, in the Spanish Civil War he had risen through the International Brigades to command first the French 14th Bde, then a division in the defense of Bilbao in 1937. In Tunisia, it was he who had formed and led the *Corps Franc d'Afrique*, the unit of French, Spanish and North African volunteers which then became the nucleus of the new Régiment de Marche du Tchad. In all the battles of the Liberation the cost paid by the 2 DB in the lives of audacious and devoted platoon and company commanders was high.

The division's surviving veterans were respected and celebrated for the rest of their lives, and several of them went on to reach high rank in the postwar armed forces or successful positions in civilian life. A single example will suffice: Jacques Massu, once an obscure Colonial company commander of African *tirailleurs* in the deserts of Tchad. After distinguishing himself at the head of a battlegroup of mechanized infantry, armor and artillery in NW Europe, and an educational taste of anti-guerrilla war in Indochina, he would rise to command the 10th Parachute Div in Algeria in 1957. Unshaken in his loyalty to President de Gaulle during the mutiny of April 1961, by 1968 he would be a four-star general commanding the French Army in West Germany.

The 2ème Division Blindée became an icon of the Liberation in French popular memory. Its role in reestablishing the self-respect of the French Army (and to some degree in legitimizing the political position of Charles de Gaulle) cannot be ignored. The envy of De Gaulle's other generals, the 2 DB stood a cut above any other French formation of World War II in the eyes of its allies and its enemies alike. When the division was raised anew in 1978, it was as an important component of the strategic reserve of the Armée de Terre, and in today's all-regular professional army it survives as the 2nd Armored Brigade. The units bearing the lineages of those that once served in the Division Leclerc have ever since celebrated their ties with it, and with its remarkable commander.

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INDEX

Figures in **bold** refer to illustrations

2ème Division Blindée 6–8, 7, 17–20, 18,
22–23, 60, 62
Combat Commands 20, 22
formations 5
leaders 20
markings 7, **H1(60–61)**
organisation 23–27
stood down 57
strength 20

Africa Free Corps 8
Alençon, Battle of 28
Alsace 51, 51
ambulances and ambulance crews 22, 53,
G1–2(54–5), **H13(60–61)**
Ardennes, the 50
Armée de l’Air **F1a(46–47)**
Armée de l’Ouest 54
Armistice Army 4
armored cars **A3(10–11)**, 12, 42
Artillerie Coloniale 9
artillery 9, 24, 25, 26–27, 43, 46, **F(46–47)**,
49, 52

Baccarat, seizure of 41, 42–43, 42, 43–44
Bavaria 57
Berchtesgaden 56, 57
Billotte, Col Pierre 23, 30, 33, 34, 36, 41
Bir Hacheim, Battle of 14
Boissieu, Capt Alain de 22
British Army 14, 16, 17
British support 12–13

Cameroun 9, 9
Caron, Adjudant Henri **D2(28–29)**
Champfleu, action at 27
Chateauroux 52
Chatillon-sur-Indre 56
chronology 6–8
Churchill, Winston 16
Colmar Pocket 50, 50, 51–53, 62
Colonial infantry 4, 31
Colonne Volante 16–17, 19
Compagnie d’accompagnement 24
Compania Sahariana No.19 12
Crusader tanks 17

de Gaulle, BrigGen Charles 4, 4–5, 5, 9, 9, 16,
17, 22, 32, 37, 50, 51, 52, 54, 56, 62
de Gaulle, Lt Philippe 43
Dio, Colonel Louis 9, 13, 18, 28, 30, 33,
35–36, 54, 62
Djebel Garci, Battle of 17
Djebel Hatleb, Battle of 16
Dompair, Battle of 37, 37, 40, 40, 41
d’Ornano, LtCol Jean Colonna 10
Douala harbour, Cameroun 9, 9
Dronne, Capitaine Raymond **D4(28–29)**, 31,
34–35
Dunkirk 5

El Alamein, Battle of 13, 14, 17
engineers 25, 27, 41, 42, 51, **H12(60–61)**

factional rivalries 16
Falaise Pocket, the 30, 32
Fessenheim 53
Fezzan, the 13–14
Forces Françaises Libres (Free French Forces) 5
Foreign Legion 8
formations
1ère Compagnie de Chars de la France Libre 17
1ère Division de Marche d’Infanterie 14
1ère Division des FFL 14
2ème Division des Forces Françaises Libre 18, 19
3ème Division Blindée 57
3ème Régiment d’Artillerie Coloniale 24, 26,
46, **F(46–47)**, **H7(60–61)**
4ème Division d’Infanterie 4
5ème Régiment de Cuirassiers 5
12ème Groupement Autonome des Chasseurs

d’Afrique **B(14–15)**, 17, 19
12ème Régiment de Chasseurs d’Afrique 19,
24, 38, **E2(38–40)**, 45, 49, 56, **H5(60–61)**
12ème Régiment de Cuirassiers 19, 19, 23,
24, 27, 34, 48, 56, 58, **H6(60–61)**
13ème Bataillon Médical 53, **G1–2(54–5)**,
H13(60–61)
13ème Régiment du Génie 25, 27, 41, 42, 51,
H12(60–61)
22ème Groupe Colonial de Force Terrestre
Antiaérienne 25, 26–27, **H11(60–61)**
40ème Régiment d’Artillerie Nord-Africain
26–27, 34, **F(46–47)**, 52, **H9(60–61)**
64ème Régiment d’Artillerie de Division
Blindée 26–27, **F(46–47)**, **H8(60–61)**
501ème Régiment de Chars de Combat; 19, 22,
23–24, **D(28–29)**, 50, 53, 59, **H4(60–61)**
Groupement Tactique D 13, 30, 33, 35–36,
41, 44, 48, 56
Groupement Tactique L 30, 32, 32, 35, 37,
37, **E2(38–40)**, 44, 48, 53, **G3(54–55)**, 57
Groupement Tactique V **D(28–29)**, 30, 33,
34, 36
Régiment Blindé de Fusiliers-Marins 22, 23,
25, **D4(28–29)**, 32, 33, **E1(38–40)**, 40, 42,
43, 51, 56, **H10(60–61)**
Régiment de Marche de Spahis Marocains
A3(10–11), 17, 25, 26, 30, 35, 56,
H2(60–61)
Régiment de Marche du Tchad 7, 8, 18,
C(20–21), 26, 30, 36, 42, 49, 49, 50, 53,
53, 59, **H3(60–61)**
Régiment de Tirailleurs Sénégalais du Tchad
9, 10, **A2(10–11)**

Fort Lamy 10
France, Battle of 4
Free French Navy 22, 23
French Equatorial Africa 9–10
French Expeditionary Corps 14
French Far East Expeditionary Corps 58, 59
French First Army 40, 50, 51–53

Gabon 10
Germany, advance into 57
Gerow, Gen Leonard 32, 34
Giraud, Gen 16, 17
Glonville 38
government-in-exile 5
Gros-Réderching 51
Groupe Nomade du Tibesti 12
Guillebon, Colonel Jacques de 9, 13, 30, 41,
54, 57

Haislip, Gen Wade 22–23, 41, 44, 48
halftracks 7, **C1(20–21)**, 24, 30
Hauteclouque, Captain Philippe de 4, 5
Hoert, Roland **D3(28–29)**
HQ Protection Company 22

Indochina 57–60, 59
Italy 14

Jemy, *Maréchal des Logis-Chef* 38
Jourdiér, Captain **A3(10–11)**

Kairouan, Battle of 17
Koenig, BrigGen 12–13, 17
Koufra, raid on 12–13, 13, 62
Ksar Rhilane, Battle of 16, 16

L Force 14, 16–17
La Colonne Leclerc 6, 9–10, **A(10–11)**, 12–14, 13
Langlade, Colonel Baron Paul de 17, 19, 28,
30, 35, 40, 54, 56, 57
l’Armée d’Afrique 16
Larminat, Gen de 56
Lattre de Tassigny, Gen Jean de 50, 51–52
Leclerc, François 4, 5, 9–10, 9, 16, 16, 18, 20,
23, 52, 53–54, 54
advance into Germany 57
death 60
first Fezzan campaign 13
in Indochina 57–60, 59

leaves 57
liberation of Paris 31–32, 34, 34–35, 37
in Lorraine 40
Normandy campaign 28
promotion to General 22
raid on Koufra 12–13, 13
raid on Mourzouk 12
second Fezzan campaign 13–14
seizure of Baccarat 42–43, 43–44
sentenced to death 13
Strasbourg operation 48, 49
Vosges crossing operation 44–46, 48
Long Range Desert Group 10, 12, 12
Lorraine 38, **E(38–40)**, 40, **G1–2(54–5)**

M3A3 light tank 22, 26, 36, 50, **G3(54–5)**
M4A2 Sherman **B1(14–15)**, 19, 20, 23,
D(28–29), 31, 32, 34, 38, **E2(38–40)**, 44,
45, 52, 58
M8 Greyhound 35, 51
M10 tank destroyer 23, 32, 33, **E1(38–40)**, 40, 41
markings **A3(10–11)**, 7, 18, 23, **E1b(38–40)**,
E2b(38–40), 41, **G3(54–5)**
Massu, LtCol Jacques 18, 18, 59, 62
Mers-el-Kebir, attack on 5
Mondon Forest 41, 42
Montgomery, Gen Bernard 14, 16, 16
Mourzouk, raid on 10, 12

Normandy campaign 23, 26, 27, 28, 30–31, 30

oath of Koufra, the 12, 13
Operation “Cobra” 28
Operation “Torch” landings 14
Oued Akarit, Battle of 17

Paris
fall of 4
liberation of **C(20–21)**, 24, **D(28–29)**, 30,
31–37, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, **G3(54–5)**
victory parade 57
Patton, George 22–23, 41
Pétain, Marshal Philippe 4
Phoney War, the 4
Piper Cub light observation aircraft 46, **F(46–47)**
Plantegenet, Capt 34
Presidential Unit Citation 49
Putz, LtCol Joseph 53, 62

Rémy, Colonel Jean 16–17, 18–19, 30, 41, 62
Resistance, the 31, 32, 33
Richardson, Col Charles 16
Royal Navy 5, 9
Royan 52, 54, 56

Saverne 44, 45
segregation 18–19
Senegal 9
Somua S35 tank 17
Strasbourg 43, 45, 48–50
supply shortages 37–38, 40

tactical signs **H(60–61)**
Temara, Morocco 18, 19
Titeux, Adj-Chef **B1(14–15)**
Tripoli 14, 16
Troupes Coloniales **A1(10–11)**
Tunis, fall of 17
Tunisia 16

unit badges **A3(10–11)**, **H(60–61)**
United Kingdom 22–23
US Army 16, 32, 51, 53, 57
Third Army 22–23, 40, 42
XV Corps 22–23, 42, 44, 45–46
44th Infantry Division 43, 44, 48, 51
79th infantry Division 43, 44, 46, 48

Vosges crossing operation 43, 44–46, 45, 48, 62

Warabiot, LtCol Louis 19, 23
weapons **A1–2(10–11)**, 13, 20, **C2(20–21)**,
D3(28–29)

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Front cover photo: Victory, at the end of a four and a half-year march: Colonial mechanized infantry of the division's III/ Régiment de Marche du Tchad, photographed with a jeep and a halftrack in front of the post office in Berchtesgaden, Bavaria, in the first week of May 1945. (Courtesy Musée du Général Leclerc du Hautcloque et de la Libération de Paris – Musée Jean Moulin)

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EDITOR'S NOTE

For clarity, English capitalization is used for French **unit titles** in this text. The list below shows the abbreviations used in the body text for the units of the division (see also under Plate H); fuller versions appear in the captions and plate commentaries:

2 DB = 2ème Division Blindée
501 RCC = 501ème Régiment de Chars de Combat
12 RCA = 12ème Régiment de Chasseurs d'Afrique
12 RC = 12ème Régiment de Cuirassiers
RMSM = (1er) Régiment de Marche de Spahis Marocains
RBFM = Régiment Blindé de Fusiliers-Marins
RMT = Régiment de Marche du Tchad
I/ 3 RAC = I Groupe / 3ème Régiment d'Artillerie Coloniale
I/ 40 RANA = I Groupe/ 40ème Régiment d'Artillerie Nord-Africain
XI/ 64 RADB = XI Groupe/ 64ème Régiment d'Artillerie de Division Blindée
22 GC-FTA = 22ème Groupe Colonial Force Terrestre Antiaérienne
13 BG = 13ème Bataillon du Génie
13 BM = 13ème Bataillon Médical

Sub-units are indicated by a forward slash: e.g. 3/ 12 RC = 3ème Escadron/ 12ème Régiment de Cuirassiers; II/ RMT = II Bataillon/ Régiment de Marche du Tchad, etc.

French ranks are anglicized in the text; most are self-explanatory, but note that the rank of major has several French equivalents depending upon appointment. The basic rank is *commandant*, but a major commanding a battalion is a *chef de bataillon*, and the cavalry equivalent is *chef d'escadrons*. French ranks equivalent to British warrant officers Class 2 and 1 are *adjudant* and *adjudant-chef*. Cavalry ranks for sergeant and staff sergeant/ sergeant-major are *maréchal des logis* and *maréchal des logis-chef*, and for corporal, *brigadier*. The exact dates of some officer promotions vary in the sources, depending upon official recognition.

ARTIST'S NOTE

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